

David Krasner

# A HISTORY OF MODERN DRAMA

Volume I



 WILEY-BLACKWELL



# A History of Modern Drama

Volume I

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David Krasner



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*For LeAnn Fields*





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# Preface and Acknowledgements

This work examines modern drama beginning with Henrik Ibsen and ending with Samuel Beckett, who was, to quote the title of Anthony Cronin's biography, "the last modernist."<sup>1</sup> It is written for students and teachers of dramaturgy, dramatic literature, practitioners (actors, directors, playwrights, designers), and general readers. I have tried to write broadly and analyze deeply, keeping in view those who know drama and those who have a passionate but passing interest. The book is not a substitute for reading and certainly seeing plays, but rather a research guide of some originality. I have drawn on the rich enterprise of prior scholarship: there are many books on modern drama and I have profited from their insight.<sup>2</sup> However, with few notable exceptions, researchers take the term "modern" for granted. As a result, scholars either oversimplify the intellectual horizon of modernism or editorialize, focusing only on those aspects that support their tendentious theories. I analyze plays and playwrights which constitute multiple features of modern drama, attempting to illuminate each dramatist's particular brand of modernism. The book will not only examine the most important playwrights and plays of the period, but also analyze how the plays operated in modern cultural, philosophical, and political contexts. My aim is to offer a theory of "modern drama": its development and consistencies as well as its contradictions, incongruities, and chronological oddities. While I do not pretend to offer a full explanation of the very broad and elusive terms "modernism" and "modern drama," I hope to come as close as possible by examining philosophical, social, and artistic foundations.

The topic's dilemma is compounded by the need for selection, requiring the work to navigate between encyclopedic all-inclusiveness on the one hand and narrow focus on the other. This concern necessitates a balancing act, drawing upon playwrights canonical and obscure. Many playwrights appear because of their established importance; no treatment of the subject can afford to ignore them. Others are included because they influence significant albeit narrow

areas of modern drama. I employ an eclectic approach, picking à la carte dramas from diverse groups. Plays are selected as representatives of a playwright or style creating a broad potential for comprehending “modern drama,” which, when taken together, might trace a pattern and tell us something about the subject. Some will cavil that this playwright or that has been omitted; such animadversion is inevitable and unavoidable.

The topic is also rendered challenging by virtue of modernism’s complexity. Literary critic Paul de Man notes that in compiling an anthology of eighteenth-century criticism, it “would not be too difficult to find essays that combine a wide programmatic interest with concreteness of particular detail,” because “that century still possessed a sense of the unity between the universal and the specific that enabled it to be of general interest even about the most specialized of topics.” With modernism, however, “the relationship between part and whole, between text and context, became a great deal more complex.”<sup>3</sup> The period examined here is an intense, eighty-year spasm of history when the world lurched towards innovation and revolution. Playwrights distorted and splintered reality, trying to discern something deeper and truer. If the modernist ideas never coalesced into a single, large theme – the time and place each play was written and performed and the different “isms” of modernism make uniformity untenable – the dramatists were nevertheless trying to capture glimpses of human possibility against overwhelming meaninglessness and the void.

Two additional points: first, modern drama was no less influential than other “modernisms” in art, literature, music, and architecture. Yet drama and theatre are frequently excluded or marginalized from scholarly examinations of modernism. This is unfortunate, indicating drama’s inferiority in academic and intellectual circles. Despite their secondary and even tertiary status, drama and theatre contributed to modernism. Second, every playwright examined in this work wrote for the theatre. Their plays were therefore *not literature but drama*, a distinction frequently ignored by literary departments at colleges and universities. Even most plays deemed “closet drama” (dramas to be read and not performed) had an inkling of how plays might be experienced before spectators. The playwrights were influenced by actors, directors, designers, and producers. Space limitations prevent an examination of production history; I will not annotate performances except when they bear on my interpretation. Readers looking for production history must look elsewhere. However, every effort will be made to examine works as blueprints for staging.

Editorial note: in dealing with citations, I provide an endnote of a play once and subsequently refer to the pagination in the text; critical studies will always contain endnotes. Ellipses are from authors; ellipses surrounded by brackets are mine. I have avoided production photos which can be reproduced from the Internet. Instead, I draw on illustrations from painting and sculpting in order to demonstrate how artists interfaced and the arts shared modern ideas.

Modern dramatists did not live in a vacuum, but were influenced by their artistic surroundings. The illustrations are meant to illuminate the interpretations of the plays, what W. J. T. Mitchell calls the “Renaissance notion of *ut pictora poesis*,” where “the sisterhood of the arts is always with us.”<sup>4</sup>

Emma Bennett and her staff at Blackwell (Ben Thatcher), Britto Fleming Joe, Annette Musker and Dan Leissner deserve enormous thanks for sticking with this project. I want to thank the support I’ve received from Emerson College. The staff at Plymouth Library has found every book I requested from interlibrary loan. The reader reports were invaluable; I’m indebted to the anonymous scholars who generously offered insights, advice, corrections, and encouragement. I owe everything to my wife Lynda, daughter Matildé, and my students. This book is dedicated to my dear friend and greatest supporter, LeAnn Fields.



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

LADY: *What are you waiting for?*

STRANGER: *If I only knew.*

– August Strindberg, *To Damascus (Part I)*<sup>5</sup>

ESTRAGON: *Let's go.*

VLADIMIR: *We can't.*

ESTRAGON: *Why not?*

VLADIMIR: *We're waiting for Godot.*

– Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*<sup>6</sup>

Modern drama signifies the struggle for self-realization and freedom; the turn from declamatory speech in classical drama to the intimacies of interpersonal exchange (called the fourth wall) which include silence, pauses, and inarticulateness; and the exploration of anxiety and alienation, a feeling of waiting for something inscrutable expressed in the Strindberg and Beckett epigrams above. Yet these themes, however accurate, merely begin a complicated task of defining “modern drama.” Martin Puchner reminds us that while it is “relatively easy to come to an agreement about the beginning and end of modern drama, it is much more difficult to specify what exactly modern drama was,” and “what was specifically modern about modern drama.”<sup>7</sup> The difficulty is partly owing to the fact that “modernists were giants,” Lawrence Rainey contends, “monsters of nature who loomed so large that contemporaries could only gape at them in awe”;<sup>8</sup> partly owing to modern drama’s insistence on up-to-dateness, what Terry Eagleton calls the “rebellious adolescence” of modernism, “defined by a definitive rupture with its parentage” and implying that “renewal” must always

be present and evolving;<sup>9</sup> and partly because defining modernism has been an academic obsession creating myriad descriptions and explanations.<sup>10</sup>

To make sense of its features, I want to propose several strands of modernism in modern drama. It would be foolhardy to suggest that *all* dramatists from 1880 to 1960 shared the same ideas; even where a school of thought derives from a single figure (Strindberg, for example, as the founder of expressionism), there is no reason to imply one defining feature or phalanstery on which all members agree. We do better to utilize Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblances" describing "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of details." The various threads running from Strindberg to Beckett might resemble one another without sharing identical features; this clustering, Wittgenstein argues, does not mean it is mistaken to call them by a unifying name, nor is it necessary to pinpoint exactly where one critical mass ends and another begins. Instead, Wittgenstein's "threads" composed of many overlapping filaments serve our purpose because "the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fiber runs through the whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibers."<sup>11</sup> If there is, throughout this book, an implicit attempt to aggregate the various "fibers" into a whole, this should be understood as my effort at fusing various elements.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) defines modernism as a "usage, mode of expression, or particularity of style or workmanship characteristic of modern times." The term derives from the Latin *modernus*, which means "now time."<sup>12</sup> Time and place overlap in modern drama because modern dramatists were deeply influenced by how we think of both in a social and personal context. The thrust of the modern age, Stephen Kern asserts, "was to affirm the reality of private time against that of a single public time and to define its nature as heterogeneous, fluid, and reversible." Owing to socio-economic changes and the clustering of people in the cities, "the wireless, telephone, and railroad timetables necessitated a universal time system to coordinate life in the modern world."<sup>13</sup> The dislocation of a universal time into a private, subjective, and personal time managed against public (social) demands, as well as the balance between change and stasis, is described by Charles Baudelaire's oft-quoted definition of modernism: "the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable."<sup>14</sup> Space, too, encroached on characters in the plays of Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov and onward throughout twentieth-century modernism, typifying what Raymond Williams calls "a repeated search for some means of defining the humanity that cannot be lived in these well-ordered rooms – the forces outside, the white horses or the seagull, the tower of the cherry orchard, which have meaning because there are forces inside these people in these rooms, which cannot be



realized in any available life.” The rebellious nature of modern dramatic characters is illustrated by “an individual who is breaking away from what is offered as general truth: a uniquely representative figure (representative of ‘humanity,’ of ‘Man’) who is in revolt against the representative environment other men have made. The world of action, characteristically, is then the action of others; the world of consciousness is one’s own. Out of this separation, and out of its terrible tensions, these men trapped in their rooms make their only possible, their exceptionally powerful, drama.”<sup>15</sup>

“Modernity” is the overarching cultural and political phenomena beginning with the Enlightenment era (c. late eighteenth century) that is still largely with us, and “modernism” is an aesthetic period (1880 to 1960) stressing what Daniel Schwarz calls “a lack of coherent identity” and “techniques to express this idea.”<sup>16</sup> In art and literature artistic techniques were largely reactions against realism. Realism was deemed too literal to convey the fragmentary and disjointed modern world. Modernism, Fredric Jameson contends, is a “narrative category” that “cancels and surcharges” realism. If, as Jameson posits, “realism is grasped as the expression of some commonsense experience of a recognizable real world, then empirical examination of any work we care to categorize as ‘modernist’ will reveal a starting point in that conventional real world, a realistic core as it were, which the various telltale modernist deformations and ‘unrealistic distortions,’ sublimations or gross characterizations, take as their pretext and their raw material, and without which their alleged ‘obscurity’ and ‘incomprehensibility’ would not be possible.”<sup>17</sup> Modern drama, however, incorporates the obscure and surreal along with the realism of Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw, and others largely because the human presence onstage cannot be thoroughly deformed, distorted, or rendered incomprehensible. Literature and art can explore other-worldly genres and non-corporeal venues, but drama is tethered to the human form – the “real world” of the human body. Dramatists certainly characterized modern drama as “experimental,” often creating distorted images, gross characterizations, masks, and narrative obfuscations; still, unless performers are puppets (as the actor and designer Gordon Craig tried to represent), or presentations are designed without the human body (radio drama, for instance), the “real” presence of bodies onstage yokes drama into a realism of sorts. Therefore modern drama, as opposed to other art forms, sublimates realism and avant gardism under its rubric because the human form is an irrefutable and consistent link between them.

Modernism was the condition in which tradition was found to be lacking and the task of making sense of ourselves and the world could no longer depend on prior authority, religion, or antiquity.<sup>18</sup> It represented massive social, economic, philosophical, and artistic changes brought about by a rejection of Classical formalism (seventeenth century) and Enlightenment rationalism (eighteenth century), and was influenced by two revolutions: the nineteenth-century industrial

revolution, where widespread technological advances occurred, and the French Revolution (1789), where the monarchy were overthrown and replaced temporarily by democratic egalitarianism. It signified a turn from deities and moral certainty and towards self-conscious individualism and ambiguity in judgment, values, and interpersonal relations. In *Theory of the Modern Drama*, Peter Szondi writes that the “drama of modernity came into being in the Renaissance,” resulting from “a bold intellectual effort by a newly self-conscious being who, after the collapse of medieval worldview, sought to create an artistic reality within which he could fix and mirror himself on the basis of interpersonal relationships alone.”<sup>19</sup> I concur but suggest that the interpersonal relationships did not fully materialize until dramatists wrote plays in which the artifice of the “fourth wall,” actors speaking to each other interpersonally and not declamatorily to the audience, took root. When the actors turned inward, addressing each other onstage and establishing, once and for all, the realistic person-to-person interchange that replaced the classical style of direct address to the audience (even as an aside), modern drama and theatre arose. This transition did not occur overnight; even plays deemed “modern” still employed the occasional address to the audience. Nevertheless, by the early nineteenth century, Frederick Hegel says, “our age is a birth-time, and a period of transition. The spirit of men has broken with the old order of things.”<sup>20</sup>

Peter Gay describes modernism as “a call to authenticity” that “detested formulas and prized originality. Whether a Realist, Symbolist, Expressionist, Vorticist, or proponent of any of the other isms crowding one another early in the twentieth century, each modernist liked to see himself defying stifling rules and deadening traditions, to stand as a nemesis to the tyranny of academicism.” Modernism, he asserts, “was a crusade in behalf of sincerity, in behalf of an expressive freedom that no establishment could command or, in the long run, frustrate.”<sup>21</sup> This call to authenticity resulted in autonomy – the individual discovering itself as the source of value and comprehension – rather than depending on uniformity or non-reflexive authority such as God’s external judgment and feudal hierarchy. Bert Cardullo contends that in modern drama, “the patriarchal relationship between God and the individual soul has been replaced by the adversarial relationship between a person and his or her own psychology, the will to comprehend the self, even as the patriarchal relationship between ruler and subject has been replaced by the adversarial relationship between the individual and society, in the form of society’s drive to marginalize all those it cannot or will not homogenize.”<sup>22</sup> Art itself broke apart as a unifying experience, sowing the seeds of revolutionary intent. The idea of art’s autonomy, Matei Calinescu observes, “was by no means a novelty in the 1830s, when the battle cry of Art for Art’s Sake became popular in France among circles of young Bohemian poets and painters.” Still, it was a rallying point for

modernists “who had become empty of romantic humanitarianism and felt the need to express their hatred of bourgeois merchantilism and vulgar utilitarianism.”<sup>23</sup> The self-conscious attack on bourgeois mores is characterized by the romantic poet Arthur Rimbaud, who wrote that the “first task of the man who wants to be a poet is to study his own awareness of himself, in its entirety; he seeks out his soul, he inspects it, he tests it, he learns it. As soon as he knows it, he must cultivate it!” In the process, “A poet makes himself a visionary through long, boundless, and systematized *disorganization of all the senses*. All forms of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself, he exhausts within himself all poisons, and preserves their quintessences.”<sup>24</sup> Or, as the romantic essayist Herder put it even more bluntly, “The artist is become the creator God.”<sup>25</sup>

Sociologically life underwent enormous transitions. Technological advances increased the speed of everyday life; living shifted from rural to urban, demanding accommodation to a new congestion and proximity; rising industrialization created new forms of wage earnings; and people coped with new social networking and family bonds. Sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies wrote in 1887 that modernism is situated around the transition from *Gemeinschaft* (rural and stable community) to *Gesellschaft* (urban and unstable society): “everyone who praises rural life has pointed to the fact that people there have a stronger and livelier sense of Community. Community means genuine, enduring life together, whereas Society is a transient and superficial thing. Thus *Gemeinschaft* must be understood as a living organism in its own right, while *Gesellschaft* is a mechanical aggregate and artifact.”<sup>26</sup> Transportation sped from animal to machine; health improved; photography and film altered vision; and telegraph and telephones accelerated communication. The conception of time changed by dint of “timetables,” what Tony Judt calls “the ubiquitous station clock” at every railway stop, where “prominent, specially constructed towers at all major stations, inside every booking hall, on platforms and (in the pocket form) in the possession of railway employees” yielded “the establishment of nationally and internationally agreed upon time zones; factory time clocks; the ubiquity of the wristwatch; time schedules for buses, ferries, and planes; for radio and television programs; school timetables; and much else.”<sup>27</sup> Modernism meant the appearance of an emerging middle class demanding higher education, free speech, democracy, pluralism, consumerism, objective judiciary in courts of law, and a new spirit of improvement and openness. These paradigm shifts took place internally and externally; people became aware of a new era whose features informed pace, structure, and relationships. To be modern was to live under the rubric of “modernization,” what Paul Greenhalgh calls the collective response to “a state of being that exists in a tense, intertwined relationship with modernization.”<sup>28</sup>

## The Modern-Classic “Quarrel”

The rejection of Classicism – with its enforced conformity and decorum – is referred to as the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, a seventeenth-century debate over neoclassical strictures and modern release from conventional expectations. The French neoclassicists of the late seventeenth century borrowed from the earlier Italian Renaissance the notion of “rules” in drama; the argument went that by asserting rules – thought to carry the imprimatur of antiquity – dramaturgical construction would transcend medieval drama. The plays of the middle ages were often sprawling, month-long affairs, concerned less with plot and more with didactic Bible lessons. By serving as custodians of Aristotelian ideas, the French neoclassicists imposed formal rules: tightly constructed plots, occurring at one time and place, tamping down the turgidity of medieval drama and thereby sharpening focus. Though many Italian Renaissance and French neo-classicists believed that the rules they imposed – dramatic narratives containing one time, place, and action – derived directly from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, those who held this belief were largely incorrect: the number of neo-classic ideas on dramatic theory drawn unadulterated from the *Poetics* were exiguous. Still, for centuries the neo-classic opinion prevailed. Romanticism, beginning in the late eighteenth century and flourishing during the first half of the nineteenth, objected to classicism’s unities of time, place, and action known as the *trios unités* (something Aristotle never actually said), replacing them with individual self-consciousness. Playwrights were to be guided not by logic and rules but by imagination and inspiration; the poet was now the seer, possessor of an inexplicable muse stimulated by nature – the poet was even construed as “nature” itself. Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) influenced the romantics and the modernists when he stated that we do not understand beauty by means of cognition, “but rather relate it by means of imagination (perhaps combined with understanding) to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure. The judgment of taste is therefore not a cognitive judgment, hence not a logical one, but is rather aesthetic, by which is understood one whose determining ground *cannot be other than subjective*.”<sup>29</sup> The romantic “genius” made him or herself the nodal point of the art work instead of reproducing eternal verities. Subjectivity – the autonomous artist creating imaginatively – was the gateway to spontaneity and reflected a modern world that put stock in individualism over collective or received certainties.

Modern drama epitomizes individualistic self-expression, revealing its nascent beginnings (though not yet fully formed) in the romantic movement of the early nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup> According to M. H. Abrams, the romantic quest turns “on a metaphor which, like ‘overflow,’ signifies the internal made external. The most frequent of these terms was ‘expression,’ used in contexts

indicating a revival of the root meaning *ex-ressus*, from *ex-premere*, ‘to press out.’”<sup>31</sup> Romanticism rejected the Enlightenment’s “mirror” in art – the need to reflect reality – substituting instead an inner “lamp” or self-reflective glow. Self-expression permeates every fabric of modern drama, from characters expressing their identity, to the individual’s search within his or her consciousness in an effort to uncover personal experiences or values. Henrik Ibsen’s “joy of life,” Anton Chekhov’s “ennui,” Bertolt Brecht’s “estrangement effect,” Arthur Miller’s “attention must be paid,” and many other themes stem, in one way or another, from the soul-searching quest for self-illumination.

The desire to express oneself is nowhere better exemplified than in the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. For him, Kant’s idea of the “thing-in-itself” – the incomprehensibility of things and objects beyond surfaces – is made comprehensible through art. The poet, he contends, “grasps the Idea, the essence of humanity, beyond all relations, beyond all time, the adequate observation of the thing in itself in its highest level.” Comprehending this “essence,” he says, is superior in the poet than the historian, because what the poet can present “is by far more accurately and distinctly to be found in poetry than in history; to the former, therefore, as paradoxical as it sounds, much more real, genuine, inner truth to be attributed than to the latter.” The historian (here Schopenhauer echoes Aristotle) can only “follow individual events exactly according to life.” The poet, “by contrast, has apprehended the Idea of humanity from precisely the particular side from which it is to be displayed, it is the essence of his own self that is objectified for him in it” and “his paradigm [the art work] stands before his spirit firm, distant, brightly illuminated, [which] cannot abandon him.”<sup>32</sup>

There is an aesthetic and social fault line between modern drama and what preceded it. For the classicists, subject matter and its treatment were divided along three stratas: the high tragic and sublime; the mid domestic (pleasing and inoffensive); and the low comic and grotesque. With modernism, these hierarchies dissolved. According to Erich Auerbach, “What the nineteenth century accomplished – and the twentieth has carried the process still further – was to change the basis of correlation: it became possible to take subjects seriously that had hitherto belonged to the low or middle category, and to treat them tragically.”<sup>33</sup> Prior to the nineteenth century, ordinary people lived their lives by and large *vertically*, referencing heaven above and hell below, and bowing to authority along a top-to-bottom grid. People knew their place; the verticality created tension and dramatic conflict, but it was generally known who was in what hierarchal station. In modernism, people lived their lives *horizontally*, jostling for social positions in flatter planes and more porous and uncertain relationships. Such ambiguity fostered alienation, a sense of waiting for something that will never occur either from heaven above or amongst others below. Individuals are responsible for their own actions; humanity is

empowered by this new autonomy yet diminished by human limitations and shortcomings. Friedrich Hebbel's play *Maria Magdalena* (1844), which influenced Ibsen and other modern dramatists, demonstrates this fault line. The protagonist, Master Anton, is a cabinet maker and a man of consistent beliefs in society's hierarchy and conventions. He is deeply offended by the accusation that his son is a thief, and is overwhelmed by his daughter's out-of-wedlock pregnancy. The thought of her bearing a child as an unwed mother shakes the very foundation of his belief-system. The daughter Klara, however, does not share his view; she defies his authority and refuses to acknowledge her actions as transgressive. He disowns her, which provokes her suicide. At the play's conclusion, his Secretary confronts his stubborn adherence to convention: "When you suspected her all you thought about was the tongues that would hiss, but not about the worthless snakes they belonged to." Her accusation reveals the divide between the father's social standing and conformity on the one hand, and Klara's rebellion and individuality on the other. Anton ends the play saying "I don't understand the world anymore!"<sup>34</sup> The breakdown of comprehension illustrates the social divide, as old world rigidity transformed into new world liberation; or, as Joseph Wood Krutch put it, "The important thing is the sense of a discontinuity between the worlds in which the father and the daughter live, of the impossibility of communication across the chasm which separates the past from the future."<sup>35</sup> What emerged was a crisis of "freedom" and disruption from continuity.

Freedom became a modernist shibboleth.<sup>36</sup> Robert Pippin asserts that Rousseau and many modernists to follow were "aware of the great depth and often sheer contingency of modern socialization" and did not settle for simplistic notions of freedom. For Pippin, modernists "realized that they lived in very different sorts of societies, societies that were themselves, for the first time, so powerfully influential and formative that any talk of the strictly natural requirements of man, the nature of our sympathies, the predictability of our passions would be dangerously simplistic. From now on, it was clear that if we were to be consistently free, we must be autonomous, directing life in a way wholly self-imposed and self-regulated."<sup>37</sup> But how, then, are we to communicate if each of us exists freely and independently? The condition necessitated a more vivid and heightened sense of communication. New dramatic structures and topics were required, necessitating a new vitality in language and action. Marshall Berman called "modernism" a "mode of vital experience – experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils." This modern environment cut "across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology" that "unites all mankind." Berman cautions, however, that modernism "is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of

ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, ‘all that is solid melts into air.’”<sup>38</sup>

## The “Trauma” of Alienation

Modernism amplifies the notion that the truest art surfaces from the margins – from misunderstood geniuses, the bowels of society, and the outsider who mocks the status quo. The tremendous changes created a “trauma of alienation” – a feeling that the past is unmoored, the future uncertain, and the present an unstable relation of people and things. The complexity of modernism, writes John McGowan, “stems from its containing both the spiritualistic, religious impulses of high romanticism and the scientific, rationalistic impulses of realism while at the same time bringing to the center stage the issue of art’s autonomy. Modernism can never decide if it wants to occupy the fully secular and political world of modernity that realism attempts to master or if it wants to escape into some separate aesthetic realm that is more free and more pure than the world of ordinary human making.” Modern artists not only split focus between realistic secularism and romantic spiritualism, they were hardly sanguine about art’s ability to improve the world; like the romantics, according to McGowan, the modernists “harbor hopes of transforming the world of modernity, but with much less belief than nineteenth century artists/intellectuals that such acts of transformation are within their power.”<sup>39</sup> Doubt and skepticism – of religion, society, politics, ethics, and art itself – emerged as an underlining motif, leaving modern dramatic characters existentially bereft and unhinged. One of the consequences of dethroning God and morality meant, in Art Berman’s words, “that neither God nor human can do anything about time.”<sup>40</sup> Temporal uncertainty – what will happen next? – exerted a tremendous influence on modern dramatists.

Modern drama highlighted disillusionment, where displacement and *ennui* personify modern existence. According to Michael Goldman, “Characters in modern drama are typically haunted by a feeling of being cut off from the joy of life, or indeed from life itself, as feeling of being dead.” This alienation, Goldman explains, motivated “a particular notion of where the fulfillment lies, of how the self defines itself and how the job of life is recognized.” Rather than outward fulfillment (heaven, kingdoms, or the conquest of other external spaces), modernism is marked by “the drive to conquer inner space, to possess internally a transcendent quality of being.” This quest, he notes, “is validated by an expansion, possession, or transfiguration of the self.”<sup>41</sup> Transfiguration and alienation were known prior to modernism, but the ways and means of experiencing them differed. For example, Shakespeare’s protagonist, Richard III, exemplifies a pre-modern perception of alienation. When he is surrounded by

his foes at the play's conclusion, he cries out "My kingdom for a horse." The exchange of a kingdom for a horse (his vehicle of escape) would have resonated with Elizabethans; kingdoms (and their expansive spaces) are what humans aspire to, so an exchange would carry symbolic value. The irony is that for a mere horse Richard was offering something of enormous value, at least in the minds of Elizabethans. But to the moderns, kingdoms are abstractions derived from royalty and rendered virtually meaningless. Inner self-possession and fulfillment, rather than outward appreciations and possession, define modernism's value. Kingdoms atavistically handed down are replaced by modernism's individuality and, more importantly, the accumulation of wealth. According to Karl Marx, the power of liquidity is a modernist turning point; it replaced the surfeit of kingdoms because money can now purchase "inner kingdoms." Money for Marx is the triggering mechanism of transfiguration, the force for good and evil, and the means of changing reality's permutations:

That which exists for me through the medium of money, that which I can pay for, i.e., which money can buy, that *am* I, the possessor of money. The stronger the power of money, the stronger am I. The properties of money are my, the possessor's, properties and essential powers. Therefore what I *am* and what I can do is by no means determined by my individuality. I *am* ugly, but I can buy the *most beautiful* woman. Which means to say that I am not *ugly*, for the effect of *ugliness*, its most repelling power, is destroyed by money. As an individual, I am *lame*, but money procures my twenty-four legs. Consequently, I am not lame. I am a wicked, dishonest, unscrupulous and stupid individual, but money is respected, and so also is its owner. Money is the highest good, and consequently its owner is also good.<sup>42</sup>

Ibsen takes this idea of transformation and inner fulfillment further. When Ibsen's protagonist Nora at the conclusion of his play *A Doll's House* prepares to leave the security of her home, husband, three children – and *money*, for her husband is a banker with a stellar reputation to uphold – she explains her reasons for leaving: she is not up to the task of mother and wife. A modernist influenced by romantic notions of inner fulfillment, Nora has waited for the notion of "the miracle," as she calls it, to occur – the miracle of her husband's sacrifice. When she finds him woefully falling short of her ideals, she realizes that she, too, must look selfishly inward. Torvald says that "Before all else, you're a wife and a mother," but Nora replies:

I don't believe in that anymore. I believe that, before all else, I'm a human being, no less than you – or anyway, I ought to try to become one. I know the majority thinks you're right, Torvald, and plenty of books agree with you, too. But I can't go on believing what the majority says, or what's written in books. I have to think over these things myself and try to understand them.<sup>43</sup>



Ibsen's protagonist defines the key feature of modern interiority. Social rules and obligations become mere external hand-me-down artifacts no longer applicable to the modern world. Torvald's kingdom – *a doll house* – is exchanged by Nora for inner freedom. Instead of convention and certainty, with its routine and subjugating conditions, Ibsen's Nora transforms, leaving behind home, family, security and all prior investments held dear to a pre-modern existence. She leaves the stage space, with its comforts and familiarity, transgressing, indeed challenging the very ideals of matrimony and motherhood. It is deliberately vague where she is going, because metaphorically she is following Baudelaire's directive to become a modernist "idler," which means "dwelling in the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, the fleeting and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere; to see the world, to be at the very centre of the world, and yet to be unseen in the world, such are some of the minor pleasures of those independent, intense and impartial spirits."<sup>44</sup>

### Three Modernisms: Romanticism, Realism, and Avant Garde

Modern dramas were primarily the intersection of three major aesthetic movements: romantic idealism of the early to mid nineteenth century, realism of the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth century, and avant-gardism of the late nineteenth and early to mid twentieth century. All three shared much in common and – ironically – all worked diligently to reject any suggestion of mutuality. Yet, in retrospect, what is at stake is not so much disagreements between them (although disagreements occurred vehemently), as the different levels and emphases they characteristically employed. All three aesthetic movements were influenced by *history* – concerns with the past and how it folds into the present – and three key philosophers of modernism: Hegel, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer.

Romanticism, realism, and the avant garde come into being with the advent of *historicism* – the emphasis on documenting and verifying the past. The Enlightenment and earlier periods were concerned with history, but they generally viewed people as largely consistent throughout most ages and the aims of their historical inquiries into the past were to secure and construct an aesthetic simultaneity with the present. The pre-modern period "championed the concept of *continuity* in all areas," observes Henri Lefebvre, whereas with "the new period comes an upsurge of *discontinuity*."<sup>45</sup> Continuity helped promote symmetry in the arts: if everything in the past, present, and assumed future is similar then the structure of the arts could remain consistent. This is why "rules" were stressed and why Voltaire, for instance, introduced the "philosophy

of history” in order to break free of the supernatural (myths and legends) and illustrate what he called the “four blessed ages” where the “arts” flourished. The value of history for him and other Enlightenment philosophers was to identify exemplary eras in order to stimulate their contemporaries.<sup>46</sup> During early-nineteenth-century Romanticism, however, this view radically changed. Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* began a process of periodization that demonstrated stages in human development accentuating differences rather than similarities. Hegel’s study ushered in what he called the “painful struggles of history,” pitting differing views in a dialectical conflict of “world-historical” spirit.<sup>47</sup> This movement brought about a revolt against similarities with the past and raised, in Isaiah Berlin’s words, an “historicism” where “you can understand other human beings only in terms of an environment very dissimilar to your own.”<sup>48</sup> Hegel, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Auguste Comte, among others, advanced the modern idea that, as Karl Löwith put it, “no phenomenon can be understood philosophically unless it is understood historically, through a demonstration of its temporal derivation and destination, its function, significance, and relative right in the whole course of history.”<sup>49</sup>

Modernism in drama sets itself as an antithesis to Romantic idealism. Toril Moi’s study of Ibsen raises this point when she says that the “true aesthetic antithesis of modernism is not realism, but idealism,”<sup>50</sup> which is why (with the exception of Georg Büchner) I begin with Ibsen. This antithesis, however, makes modernism beholden to romanticism because modernism is in revolt against the German romantic ideas of *Innerlichkeit* (inwardness) and human nature. German romantic idealism puts its stock in the “ideal” world – Schelling’s “spirit of nature” and Schiller’s reestablishing “the unity of human nature,” for instance – and modernism rebels by exposing idealism’s false claims of unity in nature.<sup>51</sup> This view is similar to Robert Brustein’s observation of modern drama as a revolt that “rides in on the second wave of Romanticism – not the cheerful optimism of Rousseau, with his emphasis on institutional reform, but rather the dark fury of Nietzsche, with his radical demand for a total transformation of man’s spiritual life.” While I would add Hegel and Schopenhauer as principal philosophers of modern drama, I agree with Brustein that “Nietzsche remains the most seminal philosophical influence on the theatre of revolt, the intellect against which almost every modern dramatist must measure his own.”<sup>52</sup>

It was from Schopenhauer that Nietzsche considered the world in terms of volition conceived not, Jerrold Seigel informs us, “as a faculty of individuals, but as the cosmic power at the center of the universe, and the motive force of all experience and history.”<sup>53</sup> Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871), written amidst the ferment and heady days of the Franco-Prussia War, lays the foundation of modern drama perhaps more than any seminal text. It challenged, among other things, the philistine materialism, optimism, and decadence of

bourgeois culture; the conventional wisdom of Greek tragedy as pristine and the Greek chorus as the “rational-ideal” spectator; and the effect of tragedy that, as Nietzsche insists, “never rested on epic suspense, on teasing people and making them uncertain about what will happen now or later.” Instead, Greek tragedy relied on “those great rhetorical and lyrical scenes in which the passion and dialectic of the protagonist swelled into a broad and mighty stream. Everything was in preparation for pathos, not for action; and anything that was not a preparation for pathos was held to be objectionable.”<sup>54</sup> Nietzsche’s book revolved around the twin axis of “Apollonian” and “Dionysian.” Apollo, the god of reason and light, facilitated sober judgment and dream-like assurances. Apollo stood for what Nietzsche, borrowing from Schopenhauer, called the *principium individuationis*, the ordinance of nature that promoted the individual’s purity and uniqueness. Dionysus, the god of intoxication and music, reigned over impulsive nature and the flow of energy that contradicted Apollonian stable boundaries between individuals, objects, and the certainty of existence. The Dionysiac cosmos, with its reliance on music to animate life, characterizes Nietzsche’s counterbalance against the superficial notion of Greek serenity and austerity, as well as the positivism of technological advancement and the philosophy of Hegel, where actions advance history and humanity. “Dionysiac man is similar to Hamlet,” Nietzsche says: “both have gazed into the true essence of things, they have acquired knowledge and they find action repulsive, for their actions can do nothing to change the eternal existence of things, they regard it as laughable or shameful that they should be expected to set to rights a world so out of joint. Knowledge kills action.”<sup>55</sup> This thinking is romantic idealism shorn of hope, or the illusion of the individual as a source of renewal.

Romantic idealism was a philosophic and artistic outlook that believed in the mind’s ability to overcome reality; the quotidian could be transcended if only one’s intellect and passions rose above life’s inadequacies. For romantic idealists the only thing real is feelings emanating from the mind; all material and temporal existence takes as its start and end point individual mental consciousness. With the fall of aristocracy resulting from the French Revolution, and the collapse of religious faith, European intellectual thought stressed the individual, specifically individual feeling as the ideal aesthetic. Romanticism, writes Baudelaire in “The Salon of 1846,” lies “neither in the subject an artist chooses nor in his exact copying of truth, but in the way he feels.” Where artists were outward-looking prior to modernism, the modern artists looks “inward, as the only way to find it.”<sup>56</sup> It, for Baudelaire, is the search for beauty and the divine, and this search, writes one of the founders of idealism, the playwright-philosopher Frederich Schiller, is “the sphere of unfettered contemplation and reflection; beauty conducts us into the world of ideas, without however taking us from the world of sense.” Beauty is thus “a process of abstraction from

everything material and accidental, a pure object free from every subjective barrier, a pure state of self-activity without any admixture of passive sensations.”<sup>57</sup> Beauty was perfection for the romantic idealists, an absolute state within art, literature, music, and drama that served the most immediate conduit to truth and freedom. This ideal was not, as the Enlightenment rationalists thought, a timeless and eternal form, but rather a product of sensualist subjectivism. In order to achieve individualism the subject demanded freedom; the romantics put tremendous stock in “freedom” because without it the individual remained bound by custom and law. The idea of “*Bildung*,” the German literary term defining educational development and maturation, is inextricably linked to free choice. Frederick Beiser writes that the “romantics insist that *Bildung* must arise from the free choice of the individual, that it must reflect his own decisions. The self realizes itself only through specific decisions and choices, and not by complying with general cultural norms and traditions.”<sup>58</sup> Romanticism (following Kant) stressed the individual genius, encouraging artists to follow their own inspiration. For romantic idealism art, more than anything, helped humanity achieve a state of absolutism – a purity beyond the materially mundane and idealized as a mental frame of mind. This artistic inspiration, however, comes at great cost; Frank Kermode reminds us that for Baudelaire and the romantics, isolated in the modern city, “the poet is a ‘seer’” and the poet’s supreme image, “for all its concretion, precision, and oneness, is desperately difficult to communicate, and has for that reason alone much to do with the alienation of the seer as the necessary of his existing in the midst of a hostile society.”<sup>59</sup>

Romanticism begins with the French Revolution in 1789, transpiring throughout Europe in the nineteenth century, and manifesting in the multiple European Revolutions of 1830, 1848, and 1871, as well as the American Civil War of 1861–65. These upheavals accentuated the internecine conflicts of class, race, region, religion, nationalism, and the desire for human equality and freedom that were the cause and consequence in France in 1789. They were exhilarating times that also left the world, Henri Lefebvre notes, with a feeling of fragmentation and alienation, “slow but overpowering, influencing knowledge, behaviour, and consciousness itself.”<sup>60</sup> The revolutions inspired the dramatic mode known as melodrama, because revolutions, Peter Brooks writes in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, marked “the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch), the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society, and the invalidation of the literary forms – tragedy, comedy of manners – that depended on such a society.” For Brooks, “Melodrama does not simply represent a ‘fall from tragedy,’ but a response to the loss of the tragic vision. It comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the

promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern.”<sup>61</sup>

By the mid nineteenth century artists and social critics questioned romanticism’s emphasis on interiority and abstract mental concepts. The military conflicts between emerging nations and the rising industrial revolution brought suffering to a degree unknown before. Urban squalor, massive poverty, nationalist jingoism, war’s carnage, and the newly exploited class of workers known as the proletariat opened romanticism up to the charges of evading social reality. This criticism set the stage in the 1840s for a group in Germany and throughout Europe known as the Young Hegelians. These radical social thinkers (Marx among them) borrowed Hegel’s dialectics – the clash of ideas eventuating in reconciliation and synthesis – but viewed conflicts as material rather than mental, concrete rather than abstract, and in the flesh rather than in rationality and the mind. According to Jürgen Habermas, “Hegel inaugurated the discourse of modernity; the Young Hegelians permanently established it, that is, they freed the idea of a critique nourished on the spirit of modernity from the burden of the Hegelian concept of reason.”<sup>62</sup> The realists observed the massive effects of revolution, industrialization, and a rootless public alienated from social institutions. Realism surfaced as an artistic expression of objectivity: the world is a sordid place and it is the job of the realists to depict this world, warts and all. Toril Moi contends that “Realists face the truth of the human condition, idealists demand that people sacrifice themselves in the name of chimerical ideals.”<sup>63</sup> Here, then, is the point at which modern drama surfaces.

Philosophically realism is concerned with the world as it is without the mind or the individual’s influence. Realist playwrights wanted to convey a deeper veracity of life than mere subjectivity; not an exactitude of photographic representation but shaping plays that reflect cultural complexity. Realism, Astradur Eysteinnsson contends, “portrays social reality as a ‘whole’ and ultimately as a ‘common ground,’” which “holds true even when the relationship between the individuals and society is predominantly characterized by conflict.”<sup>64</sup> Realism puts its stock and trade in the conflict of individual versus society, with the individual as a “stand-in” for everyone. While this surrogation opens up realism to the critique of “universality” – a protagonist, however beleaguered, cannot represent everybody – the struggle of the individual against institutions became a dominating theme in realistic drama and a successful weapon against institutional oppression. The rise of Darwin’s evolutionism, Freud’s psychology, and Marx’s socialism altered perceptions that informed realistic dramas, tilting towards a rejection of introversion and highly subjective art of romanticism in favor of societal conflicts and psychological analysis. Human beings in society replaced the introversion of the mind; history replaced myth; ordinary people replaced royalty as the subject matter; scientific observation replaced religion; and necessity and motivation replaced fate and chance. A work of

realism in art and literature was not meant to elevate humanity but rather expose the underlying objective social condition and emphasize the quotidian over the poetic. In realism surfaces are stripped away, revealing causal networks functioning beneath appearances. Feminist social activist Emma Goldman wrote that in Gerhart Hauptmann's play about the working class, *The Weavers*, "There is nothing in literature to equal the cruel reality of the scene in the office" when "the weavers bring the finished cloth. For hours they are kept waiting in the stuffy place, waiting the pleasure of the rich employer after they had walked miles on an empty stomach and little sleep."<sup>65</sup> Modern realism explicates the specific conditions of technological social relations and the manner in which they impinge upon the individual's freedom. The painter Courbet led the way in the 1850s and 1860s with his stark depictions of ordinary life; with Courbet, writes Charles Morazé, "painting had embarked on a new mission; it was no longer concerned with historical and anecdotal erudition, but with helping men to see, and to see themselves as they were."<sup>66</sup> History of the ordinary – from the bottom up – became the rallying cry of realists who sought to inculcate psychological and sociological approaches depicting relationships, actions, and consequences. The goal politically was to expose aspects of reality obfuscated by power relations; ugliness was no longer off limits. Realists rejected all subject matter that could not be witnessed as physically existing, depicting rawness and steely-eyed observations as the core ingredient in the recreation of social perfidy. Realism is selective, demonstrating what the French call *une tranche de vie* – "a slice of life." Whereas the romantic idealists depicted something that might replace the grim façades of life, the realists sought to rip the façades down, even if this meant stripping all possibility of hope. Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov carried the banner of realism to its ascendancy, probing the falsehoods of bourgeois hegemony and drawing away the circumambience of deceit that permeated the middle class's arrogant self-perception.

The social struggles personified by the failure of the European Revolution of 1848 sparked the end of idealism as a progressive tool, giving way to realism's icy, unsentimental observations. The breakthrough of realism, in fact, can be said to occur precisely during 1848, when the reality of the revolution's demise provided the means for the dramas we associate with realism. The European Revolution of 1848, writes Mike Rapport, "were seen subsequently as failures, but one should not be too pessimistic. The events of 1848 gave millions of Europeans their first sense of politics, workers and peasants voted in elections and even stood for and entered parliament. The civil liberties that flourished all too briefly in that year also provided Europeans with the free space in which they – including women – were politicized, through participation in political clubs and workers' organizations."<sup>67</sup> Although the proletariat was defeated and the social forces of the revolution were decisively crushed, the outcome was

hardly dire. What emerged was what Lewis Namier called the ascending “middle classes led by intellectuals, and their modern ideology with which they confronted the old established powers and interests.”<sup>68</sup> Foremost among this ideology was the demand for political power sharing, national sovereignty, women’s rights, end of slavery, and freedom from aristocratic rule, all of which found its way into modern realistic dramas.

Avant-gardism typified a rejection of realism. Even where the framework of realism took critical account of social conflicts, the experience of realism and its offshoot naturalism, it was believed, failed to break free of conventional social reality. Instead of a mimetic reflection of reality, the avant garde focused on formal concerns of drama: multiple narratives, stream of consciousness, non-linear representation of time and space, heightened poetics, reliance on myths and symbols, dreamscape, fictive abstraction, fragmentation, abruptness, stridency, lyricism, disintegration of the familiar, and aggression against its own medium. These iconoclastic innovations were attempts to break through appearances in order to discover “deeper” meanings behind a common sense “realistic” framework of representations. According to Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, it is “a quality of abstraction and highly conscious artifice, taking us behind familiar reality, breaking away from familiar functions of language and conventions of form.”<sup>69</sup> However, unlike art, where abstraction comes naturally, theatre and drama still had to contend with real human bodies onstage; as Günter Berghaus observes, modernist avant-garde works “were still ‘realistic,’ but in a manner that transcended mere imitation. Modernist art modified the categories of representation and enriched them with new techniques that went beyond the traditional ‘art holding the mirror up to nature’ concept of Realism.” The formal elements of avant-garde modernism, “such as the use of incongruous and contradictory ingredients, collage of components taken from a variety of contexts, simultaneity and fragmentation of elements,” yielded “in the reader/viewer a heightened awareness of reality.”<sup>70</sup> The avant-garde modernists were concerned with a probative recovery of the “truer” self than realism could ever achieve by uncovering the instinctual and spiritual foundations beneath the surface façade. For them, the self was dispersed, contradictory, and disingenuously portrayed within the structural framework of a unified “representation.” The avant-garde modernists, Marjorie Perloff notes, urged “collage and its cognates (montage, assemblage, construction)” constituting their “central artistic invention,” and that modernist practices “call into question the representability of the sign” – the cohesion and juxtaposition of sign and reality so endemic to realism.<sup>71</sup> Realism, it was believed, relied too heavily on showing experience confidently and uniformly; Peter Bürger asserts that the fragmentary nature of the avant garde “renounces shaping a whole,” providing the artwork instead with “a different status, since parts of it no longer have the relationship to reality characteristic of the organic

work of art.”<sup>72</sup> What was needed was less focus on representation and totality, and more exposure of theatrical convention. The very features of theatre were foregrounded, stressing the theatrical apparatus; for example, being-in-a-theatre (I’m watching a play and I’m aware of this fact), it was argued, is the truer reality than pretending a fourth wall.

The avant-garde modernists celebrated the esoteric. With the exception of the Futurist F. T. Marinetti, the avant garde was unconcerned with popularity, catering to a limited circle of devotees. The avant-gardists often flouted mysteriousness, disinterested in clarifying reality and flaunting the obtuse, which they believed the common ruck could never comprehend anyway. The intrinsic lucidity of realism makes the work accessible in a way the avant garde – with its subjectivism, formal difficulty, and purposeful obscurantism – could not. The avant garde, writes Richard Murphy, opposes “realism’s characteristic gesture of pretending to offer a comprehensive survey and rational explanation of the world,” challenging instead “the narrative structures and conventional rationalist constructions through which reality is interpreted, in order that they can make the inherited realist models of the world less self-evident or ‘natural.’”<sup>73</sup> The world is not (following Hegel) linear but rather (following Nietzsche) circular, inconsistent, and lacking in Aristotelian formulas of beginning, middle, and end. August Strindberg, whose plays epitomized both realism and naturalism as well as avant-garde expressionism, wrote in his Preface to *A Dream Play* that modern characters and situations are not one-dimensional cardboard cut-outs but rather “Everything can happen, everything is possible and probable. Time and place do not exist; on an insignificant basis of reality the imagination spins and weaves new patterns into a blend of memories experiences, free fantasies, absurdities and improvisations.” For Strindberg, “characters are split, double, multiply, evaporate, condense, disperse, assemble.”<sup>74</sup> For the avant-gardists realism was too concerned with bourgeois convention and trite moral issues pertaining to crass middle-class commercialism. Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades were, according to Peter Bürger, provocation that “not only unmask[s] the art market where the signature means more than the quality of the work; it radically questions the very principle of art in bourgeois society according to which the individual is considered the creator of the work of art.”<sup>75</sup> The notion of the individual and his or her volition is deemed solipsistic by avant-gardists; such valuing puts stock in the vainglorious bourgeois individual as an autonomous being. “The hostility toward other value systems, the need to *épater le bourgeois*,” Frederick Karl writes, “is a matter of redefining human behavior within an alternate system. The artist must annihilate others’ taste to justify its milieu. The avant-garde thrives on such annihilation, Nietzsche’s death of gods carried to all forms of behavior.”<sup>76</sup>

Einstein’s physics inspired the avant garde because his theory disrupted the comfort of space and time – any objective view of it that marked realism’s



causality. Einstein maintained that comprehending space and time varies according to the relativity of motion. His ideas had a profound impact on aesthetics, undermining agreed upon judgment because simultaneity – two people observing the same thing at the same time – has no absolute certainty of consensus. According to Einstein, “Two events which, viewed from a system of coordinates, are simultaneous, can no longer be looked upon as simultaneous when envisioned from a system which is in motion relatively to that system.”<sup>77</sup> In art, then, time and space were shredded and reconfigured from new angles and perspectives. Cubism exemplifies this disorientation. Jose Ortega y Gasset noted that Einstein’s theoretical discoveries asserted that there is “no absolute space because there is no absolute perspective.” Without absolute certainty, actual space cannot be determined by a realistic totality and finality, but rather incorporates fragments that collide, disperse, and amalgamate again. As a result, Gasset contends, Einstein’s theory “is a marvelous proof of the harmonious multiplicity of all possible points of view. If the idea is extended to morals and aesthetics, we shall come to experience history and life in a new way.”<sup>78</sup>

Relativity opened up drama to a plethora of modern inventiveness and originality, casting aside rigid morality and philosophical *idée fixe*. Walter Benjamin said that ideas cannot be fleshed out through the given elements of phenomena; the realists have it wrong when they present art as merely a photo-reproduction to be analyzed objectively even if they analyze it from every angle. Instead, ideas are an amalgam of atoms or stars, colliding, moving apart, circling around. “Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars,” he remarks, and ideas “do not contribute to the knowledge of phenomena,” but rather “are timeless constellations,” where things are understood only relative to other things.<sup>79</sup> For the avant garde, what we observe as real, John Peter writes, “is not really real; that there are things which are more real than the things our perceptions report to us about; that beyond the things we perceive in ordinary life there is another reality, and we can somehow apprehend what it is; that this hidden reality – and this is an important jump – may not be clearly and rationally expressible; but that – an even more important jump – it is more significant than the one we are used to.” As a result, avant-gardists “were not interested simply in reality as they saw it: they wanted to grasp what made reality seem real, and they wanted to show us this insight in their pictures.”<sup>80</sup>

Somewhat like romantic idealism, the avant garde sought a subjective view of the world, but unlike the romantics, who took art seriously, they added sarcasm, wit, and doubt about the individual’s power to shape the world. Influenced by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the avant garde viewed human will as ridiculous and hardly worth emulating. “Eternal becoming, endless flux,” writes the aporetic Schopenhauer, “belongs to the revelation of the essence of will. The same thing shows itself finally in human endeavor and desires as well, which always mask their fulfillment in the guise of ultimate goal

of willing, but which, as soon as they are achieved, no longer look the same and are thus soon forgotten, antiquated, and really always, even if without admission, set aside as vanished deceptions.”<sup>81</sup> For Schopenhauer, the will’s ever-striving need reaches an aporia, a deadening languor, that is displayed in a life-congealing boredom. There is no “progress” in the Hegelian sense, only the odious condition of a feckless will which no action can tame. Human endeavors and desires merely sustain us with the vainglorious hope that their fulfillment will be volition’s final goal, with the irony being that once the goal is achieved, another takes its place. Avant-gardism stands for an image of the future that breaks decisively with human continuity. It is contemptuous of progress and the durability of civilization, situating instead the inchoate, serendipitous, and non-linear at the center of creation. Susan Sontag sums up this negation of art’s pedagogic purpose: “As the activity of the mystic must end in a *via negativa*, a theology of God’s absence, a craving for the cloud of unknown beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech, so art must tend toward anti-art, the elimination of the ‘subject’ (‘the object,’ the ‘image’), the substitution of chance for intention, and the pursuit of silence.”<sup>82</sup>

Many modern movements occurring in this period were really short-lived breakthroughs appearing abruptly and disappearing hastily; their influences were absorbed quickly into the large maw of modernism’s endless cycle of newness. Modernism adores the new, but quickly discards it when the gloss fades. Experimentation is one of the key constituents of modernism because it values “newness.” To experiment in the theatre, Tom Driver notes, “has usually meant to break with whatever is the reigning style and method, and in the 1890’s breaks were made in many directions. There was a veritable eruption of that modern spirit that insists on rejecting the ‘given.’”<sup>83</sup> Still, idealism, realism, and the avant garde absorbed most shorter-lived movements into their categories, creating the triumvirate of modern drama.

### **Georg Büchner and Total War**

Georg Büchner (1813–1837) was an anomaly and chronological oddity. He wrote during the period of late Romanticism, yet he rejected all that Romanticism epitomized; his work was unproduced and unrecognized until the 1870s, yet when he was discovered he served as a figurehead of modern drama; and his plays ironically spearhead both the dawn of realism as well as the nodal point of vanguard modernism’s rejection of realism. His belated discovery and retrospective influence credits him for the violent breaks and ruptures that earmark the history of modern drama. One of the reasons he illuminates modern drama so succinctly is the way Büchner grasped the failure of romantic idealism’s faith in progress and redemptive myths celebrating the creative

aesthetics of the future, ushering in instead the skepticism so endemic to modernism. He worked within the Romantic notion of historicism – his two major works deal with historically specific events – but he viewed history not, as Hegel or Comte would have it, as a positive progress towards rationalism and historical ascendancy. Instead, he raised the specter of revolt against positivism. In an 1834 letter to his bride, Büchner wrote: “I have been studying the history of the [French] Revolution. I have felt myself as if crushed beneath the fatalism of history. I find in human nature a terrifying uniformity, in human relationships an inexorable force, shared by everyone and no one. The individual is merely foam on a wave, greatness mere chance, the mastery of genius a puppet play, a ridiculous struggle against a rigid law. I will no longer bow down to the bigwigs and bystanders of history. My eyes have grown accustomed to blood.” He concludes: “What is it in us that lies, murders, steals?”<sup>84</sup>

It is impossible to overstate the influence of Georg Büchner’s intense albeit brief life and work. He was a philosopher, scientist, radical socialist, political agitator, playwright – and dead at the age of twenty-three. His nascent socialism pre-dates Marx by more than a decade; his essays set the ground for realism’s rejection of romanticism; his episodic style of playwriting anticipates Brecht; his plays are precursors for expressionism, naturalism, theatre of the grotesque, and theatre of the absurd; and his scientific research in anatomy earned him a lectureship at the University of Zurich, one of the leading European centers of higher education – all before his twenty-third birthday. Tom Driver maintains that he is the “first of the modern dramatists to engage in a ruthless stripping away of post-Renaissance idealization.”<sup>85</sup> George Steiner notes that “Büchner’s instantaneous ripeness staggers belief. The mastery is there from the outset.”<sup>86</sup> Richard Mueller remarks that the eponymous Büchner “is the seemingly inexhaustible source of modern drama and has been universally extolled by the leaders of the aforementioned movements.”<sup>87</sup> Adding to the encomium is Richard Gilman: “Büchner sees into existence and finds it perverse, unfathomably misconstrued, a mockery of our self-proclaimed dignity.”<sup>88</sup> He authored three plays during the mid-1830s, two of which, *Danton’s Death* (*Dantons Tod*, 1835) and *Woyzeck* (found in fragments decades after his death), are touchstones for critical thinking and writing on modern drama. “In Western drama,” Steiner contends, “there is a time prior to *Woyzeck* and one after – as there is before and after *Waiting for Godot*.”<sup>89</sup> Before moving on to the three giants of modern drama – Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov – it behooves us to consider the importance of Büchner as an arbiter of things to come.

Büchner’s *Danton’s Death* and *Woyzeck* dwell in the realm of the philosophical, historical, epic, and tragic. They are theatrical spectacles that address a nexus of ideas, combining violence and splintering sharp comedy, portraying explosive conflict and theatricality, language conveying enthralling lyricism and grotesque behavior, inaugurating a new form of tragic melodrama, and the topics of the

plays are linked to the consequences of the French Revolution and its aftermath. The French Revolution created an enormous crisis of belief through a series of horrifyingly violent and disconcerting events that touched virtually every aspect of daily life. Rather than a specific moment that came and went, the Revolution triggered the Napoleonic Wars, social upheaval, and the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848, to name just a few social conflicts. At each conflict was the belief that the end point of turmoil had arrived; as each event passed, new conflicts arose that created even more terrifying consequences, mocking the very idealism of an end point in violence. The notion of excess – the overload of modern society's information stream – informed the rise of melodrama. Melodrama was the dramaturgical form that responded to the spillage and terrifying collapse of authority and the subsequent void created by war, famine, poverty, and desolation of the social structures that had propped up European society for centuries. This collapse affected not merely the fracturing of kinship systems and the rituals of religious society – it engendered a widespread skepticism of the very efficacy of language itself as an instrument of truth. Disillusionment was everywhere, leading to trauma in every aspect of life.

Büchner's historical melodrama *Danton's Death* concerns the political and personal disillusionment amongst those involved in the French Revolution and its Reign of Terror. The play's episodic structure swings from interior spaces to street scenes, public debates to intimate encounters. It was as if Büchner needed to get as close to the chaos and violence as he could, letting it speak through his incendiary style, roiling from one dramatic episode to the next. The play's sensation of being dragged along through history's slippery path, rapidly shifting from interior to exterior space, pausing to observe briefly unstoppable and darkening events, resonates with the spirit of being steamrolled by bloodshed. The author set out to write a vividly imagined living history (some of the speeches by the revolutionaries are incorporated verbatim into the play) with a dramatic structure suited to the unfolding pace of changing events.

The play takes place in 1793 under Robespierre's dictatorship. The central figures are Robespierre, the ruthless idealist, and Danton, the cynical-realist whose disdain for the revolution riles Robespierre. Robespierre seeks to weed out dissent, while Danton, who at first supported Revolutionary aims, now sees only bloodbath. Danton has cryptically turned his back on his revolutionary comrades, disgusted by the excrescent brutality and the mere replacement of one horrific regime with another. Robespierre and his acolyte St. Just maintain the belief that the end justifies the means; Danton, witnessing bloodshed of staggering proportions, overthrows his revolutionary ideals and embraces a Schopenhauerian pessimism. Büchner's Danton pre-dates Nietzsche's Dionysian spirit because he does nothing but merely wait for Robespierre to drag him into court as a counter-revolutionary. When Nietzsche says that "knowledge kills action" or when Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* fail

to leave the stage, Danton also waits inactive, Hamlet-like (Büchner was influenced by Shakespeare's play), for the inevitable guillotine. In Robespierre's eyes Danton's betrayal of revolutionary principles is not traitorous because Danton is aligning with the overthrown monarchy; rather, Danton is doing something far worse: he doubts the whole enterprise of revolution.

In a startling opening gambit, Büchner situates his anti-hero, Danton, in a brothel room where card players, gaming aficionados, and prostitutes loiter about. The opening provides insights into Kantian knowledge and appearances: how do we know the thing-in-itself, Danton seems to be asking. Who are we and who are the people around us? His dialogue brings modern alienation front and center:

JULIE: Danton, do you believe in me?

DANTON: How should I know! We know little enough about one another. We're thick-skinned creatures who reach out our hands toward one another, but it means nothing – leather rubbing against leather – we're very lonely.

JULIE: But you know me, Danton.

DANTON: Yes, that's what they call it. You have dark eyes and curly hair and a delicate complexion and you always call me: dear Georges! But (*Touches her forehead and eyelids*) what about here, and here? What goes on behind here? No there's nothing delicate about our senses. Know one another? We'd have to crack open our skulls and drag each other's thoughts out by the tails.<sup>90</sup>

Büchner anticipates the most radical development of modern drama's emphasis on history, covering his large canvas with the confusion and chaos of the French Revolution. In this play the shocking headlines of history become the substance of modern drama; in the play's epic-Shakespearean style, the expression of horror emerges. Danton's sickening sense of the revolution's futility and violence begins the play; it is as if Danton cannot explain his own response to this brutal state of violence, expressing an inchoate condition that accurately reflects the situation itself. Danton struggles to peer into our open skulls, only to find blood and brain-matter but no soul or deepened knowledge. Danton's words are pell-mell, scraping and random yet always preserving the poetry of his cynicism: "I'm disgusted with it all; why must men fight one another? [...] I think there was a mistake in the creation of us; there's something missing in us that I haven't a name for – but we'll never find it by burrowing in one another's entrails, so why break open our bodies? We're a miserable lot of alchemists!" (27).

The orchestration of the Revolution and its bloody aftermath helped Büchner formulate his rejection of idealism, replaced by a deeply felt, Schopenhauerian fatalism. Robespierre is a perfect foil to Danton (who speaks for the playwright): he is Machiavellian – the end justifies the means – yet his repressed hostility is barely hidden from the surface. He possesses a highly sophisticated

understanding of Revolutionary violence, harnessing it towards Jacobin ends. Büchner captures Robespierre's brilliance as a politician and his sophisticated manipulation of revolutionary violence, demonstrating an impressive skill at diplomacy and orchestrating human behavior. But even he ultimately fails to gauge the full extent of what this violence has unleashed; the backlash against him as his fellow revolutionaries took the supreme moment of revolution in 1789 down the slippery slope of murderous abyss during the Reign of Terror (July 1793 to July 1794). The political culture of absolutism and its end were in fact not an end at all but merely a shift from one authoritarian regime to another. Robespierre's Republic of Virtue disguised a murderous utopia, an ideology with a long European pedigree of repressive utopian visions. Büchner understood perhaps as well as anyone what occurred: the metaphysical form of centralized government from royalty to revolutionary was nothing more than the replacement of one absolute ruler with another.

Why did the great ideas of the French Revolution descend into the Terror marked by the guillotine? This question, which the play raises, cuts to the core of the dilemma – the origin and justification of Revolutionary violence. Why did 1789, the period of supreme liberation from tyranny and autocracy, slide so quickly and disastrously into murderous chasm only a few years later? Büchner could see nothing constructive or beneficial in the Revolution from the outset; the creed of domination and violence anticipates George Orwell's *Animal Farm* over a century later. The play suggests that the perversion of the Revolutionary intent was written into the genetic DNA of Revolutionary violence; like the animals in Orwell's satire, the urge to totalitarianism is hard wired into our psyche. The architects of the Revolution were a product of absolutism; having lived through monarchy, the Revolutionaries sought to create a matching institution that claimed to have the general interests of the people at heart but was, as *Animal Farm* contends, merely switching one absolutism for another, replicating the very domination they had sought to overthrow. Büchner anticipates the observations of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who contend that the "revolution of European modernity ran into its Thermidor." Although it was impossible to go back to absolutism, "it was nonetheless possible to reestablish ideologies of command and authority, and thus deploy a new transcendental power by playing on the anxiety and fear of the masses, their desire to reduce uncertainty of life and increase security."<sup>91</sup> Robespierre, the intellectual force of the Revolution, was utterly selfless and supremely ambitious, a mixture of optimism (the cause will endure) with a Hobbesian sense of bleakness (human desire is corrupt), a skilled political operator filled with ideological fervor, inspirational but reclusive, a dictator who despised power yet succumbed to power's intoxication for the sake of stability and reducing anxiety in the citizens.

While Robespierre was a talented diplomat (at least until his execution), Danton is the opposite, a man inspired with ideological fervor until he is beset by the folly of such idealism. He combined all the impulses of the revolution and all the despair that followed in its wake. Danton is, in Büchner's play, overwhelmed by the horrible fatalism of history: he is stymied, abjures action, suffers from acedia, and is plagued by what would become known in modern drama as existential angst and inertia. Büchner's thinking, like Nietzsche's to come, was an inversion of Hegel's; Büchner was deeply pessimistic about the power of reason to influence history or the course of human events. According to Schopenhauer, we are imprisoned by our will; the world is what Kant said it was – a realm of appearances, of phenomena, of things-in-themselves that we can never get our head around. But for Schopenhauer it is folly to encounter the world as representation, as a place of objects governed by cause and effect; rather we ought to accept the world as intimately infused by feelings, desires, impulses, and interests. John Peter's explanation of Schopenhauer's rejection of volition as a guiding light towards reason explains Danton's fatalism; "Schopenhauer's way out of the circular hell," Peter says, "is to put an end to the striving which is its essence. It is a turning away, an obliteration, a denial: and it is all-inclusive. He admits that to abolish the Will means to abolish the world which is its objectification and mirror. It is thus inevitably the end of all effort; of all forms, or all time and space."<sup>92</sup> Such surrender is expressed by Danton's torpor alone in an open field:

I'll go no farther. Why should I disturb this silence with the rustling of my footsteps and the sound of my breath. (*He sits down; after a pause.*) I was told once of a sickness that wipes out our memory. Death must be something like that. And then at times I hope that perhaps death is even more powerful and wipes away everything. If only it were true! – I'd run like a Christian then to rescue my enemy – no memory, that is. – This place should be safe; for my memory is not for me; but the grave should give me safety, at least it will make me forget. The grave kills memory (34).

To be modern as Danton (and Woyzeck, as we will shortly see) is to be cognizant of the alienation from authority and to understand the powerlessness it creates. Romantic idealists hoped that by overthrowing the past a vastly improved future would emerge; but modernists knew better. The whole edifice of reason argued for by the Enlightenment, and the whole foundation of lyricism and aesthetic beauty as the antidote to the modern world argued for by Schiller and the Romanticists, are challenged – indeed overthrown and refuted by Büchner's skepticism and vision of revolutionary horror.

*Danton's Death* and *Woyzeck* are dramas deeply pessimistic about the power of reason to impart direction to the world. Our faculties for logic and coherence

imprison us into believing that we have power when in fact we are mere specks of dust blown sideways. The “will” as Schopenhauer remarks and Büchner equally shows lies outside representation because it is that which cannot be reached or grasped by way of separate, independent objects defined by association and causal analysis. The world of appearances is what Kant said: it is all we can fathom; and for Schopenhauer and Büchner the life urgings prompted by the will (desire) are nothing more than urges towards preservation and consumption. The use of things and their possession, as in the case of politics and love in *Danton's Death* and *Woyzeck* respectively, fail because we cannot truly know what they mean or what they are except as mere possession – mere phenomena that eventually disappoint. Desire is illusionary; we are nothing more than riding a wave. Nietzsche quotes Schopenhauer when he says, “Just as the boatman sits in his little boat, trusting to his fragile craft in a stormy sea which, boundless in every direction, rises and falls in howling, mountainous waves, so in the midst of a world full of suffering the individual man calmly sits, supported by and trusting the *principium individuationis*.”<sup>93</sup> There can hardly be a better description of Büchner's *Danton*. In 1835 he wrote:

The dramatic poet is, in my view, nothing but a writer of history. [...] His greatest task is to come as close as possible to history as it actually was. [...] I can scarcely be expected to make virtuous heroes out of Danton and the bandits of the Revolution! If I was to depict their dissoluteness then I had to make them dissolute; if I was to show them as Godless then I had to let them speak like atheists. [...] The poet is no teacher of morals; he invents and creates characters, he brings the past back to life, and from the people may learn as though from the study of history itself and the observation of it, what happens in human life around him. [...] As regards to those so-called Idealist poets, I find that they have given us nothing more than marionettes with sky-blue noses and affected pathos, but not human beings of flesh and blood.<sup>94</sup>

Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1836) is also an historical play, but unlike *Danton's Death*, it concerns the lower class. The narrative is based on a soldier executed for murdering his prostitute lover. The trial of the actual Woyzeck was one of the first clinical case studies of insanity. In several scenes in the play *Woyzeck*, a common soldier, is horribly abused and unable to cope. The passive title character is brutalized in a series of encounters with the people he depends on to subsist, primarily a doctor who pays him to participate in scientific experiments and the sneering captain of his regiment. He is tortured, too, by his beloved Marie, who takes a liking to the Drum Major. These actions inflame Woyzeck's haunted visions, adding to his already disoriented imbalance.

In one scene after another he is forced to eat only peas, required to hold his urine until told to release it, and humiliated by his lover's public betrayal. Given to superstition, hearing voices, and hallucinating toadstools, Woyzeck is



treated hardly above the circus animals he views. He observes his live-in lover, Marie, have an affair with the Drum Major, and the affair is made public in a dance hall. Humiliated, he follows them, watches them dance, tries to defy the stronger and more athletic Drum Major, and ends up taking a terrific beating in public. He murders Marie in a fit of jealous rage. Despite his incapacities, he struggles to make sense of his life, is prone to expressing philosophic ideas, and in this way he can be seen as an alienated precursor to Chekhov's Uncle Vanya, Arthur Miller's Willy Loman, Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, and the Young Woman in Sophie Treadwell's play *Machinal* (in the last case we also have, like *Woyzeck*, a murderer and an effort to evoke sympathy for the protagonist). Everything that happens to Woyzeck is the result of an oppressive environment, but Büchner avoids sentimentality. The characters that hound Woyzeck are sometimes depicted as macabre, comic caricatures (with the exception of Marie); this creates a kind of absurd, almost comic depiction, what would later be called theatre of the "grotesque" (a term used in the play). We also observe Woyzeck's Faustian quest for comprehension; his words and actions appeal to nature to be able to see the Kantian "thing-in-itself." Influenced by Shakespeare's *Othello*, Woyzeck cries out for proof of Marie's infidelity. But it is more than the appearance of a handkerchief, Iago's prop as proof for Othello, or earrings Woyzeck discovers on Marie; likewise Othello, Woyzeck wants to "see" the sin itself, to turn the intangible into the material, to take hold of something abstract and turn it into concrete reality. For Kant, and for Woyzeck, our experience shows us that there are two modes of appearances: that which is phenomena, a visual and sensual recognition of cause and effect, and "noumena," Kant's term for what lies beneath and behind the realm of surface appearances. For Woyzeck, the phenomena and their modes of perception have no purchase, have failed to reveal to him the essence of life by being cut off from "things in themselves" – we can never really "know" any "thing" beyond the surface manifestations of its physical appearance and common sense analysis and intelligibility of it.

- WOYZECK: (*looks fixedly at her and shakes his head*). Hm! I don't see it! I don't see it! My God, why can't I see it, why can't I take it in my fists!
- MARIE: (*frightened*). Franz, what is it? – You're raving, Franz.
- WOYZECK: A sin so swollen and big – it stinks to smoke the angels out of Heaven!
- You have a red mouth, Marie! No blisters on it? Marie, you're beautiful as sin. How can mortal sin be so beautiful?
- MARIE: Franz, it's your fever making your talk this way! (122)

Two remarkable facets of this play are its epochal arrangement of scenes and its recognition of war as an historical overview. In the first case, we know little about the author's plan; four (some fragmentary) versions of the play were

discovered by the author's brother decades after Büchner's death. What is fascinating about the scenes, slightly over two dozen if one adds all the versions, is that they can be arranged in any sequence and the narrative would remain intact. *Woyzeck's* modernism, Henry Schmidt writes, lies in the fact that the "many brief scenes do not form a unified architectural whole, as in classical drama, but they present instead snapshots of reality, slices-of-life, linked less to each other than to the central theme: *Woyzeck* and his environment."<sup>95</sup> The play's architectonics could be sequenced as a flashback or linearly; either way the story's coherence remains. Comparing Büchner to Shakespeare, Herbert Lindenberger writes that Büchner's dramaturgical power does "not emerge through the temporal sequence of events, but through the atmosphere of corruption and decay suggested by songs, jokes, recurring words and images, and incidents seemingly irrelevant to the play's 'main line' of action."<sup>96</sup> In *Woyzeck* theatricality is maximized, supplying music, spectacle, folk songs, dancing, marching, violence, intimacy, intensity, and physical activities (shaving, etc.). Interior and exterior scenes follow one another depending on the way a director wishes to arrange them. But no matter the arrangement, the spirit of the play coheres.

Equally impressive is the way Büchner incorporates the impact of war on ordinary people. *Woyzeck* is a conscript, a "lifer" in the army serving for nothing more than a paycheck, bed, and consistent meal. He agrees to serve as a guinea pig in scientific experimentation for additional pay, his body and mind no more than a cell under a microscope. His duties in the service include shaving officers as well as other menial tasks. Most importantly, *Woyzeck* is poor and at the disposal of warring heads-of-state, a pawn to the newly conceived notion of modern warfare. According to David Bell, Napoleon introduced the concept of "total war," changing forever the idea of warfare. Prior wars were fought chivalrously – elite knights and a few peasants engaging in combat away from civilians. Monarchs were generally afraid of arming too many civilians, thereby keeping war for the most part a private affair. Bell, quoting Clausewitz, says that before the French Revolution, "war was waged in a way that a pair of duellists carried out their pedantic struggles. One battled with moderation and consideration, according to conventional properties." In contrast, Napoleon created "war of all against all. It is not the King who wars on a king, not an army which wars on an army, but a people which wars on another, and the king and the army are contained in the people."<sup>97</sup> Napoleon raised massive armies, establishing military service as (hopefully, though often not the case) an honorable insignia for the common folk. This led to a surge in nationalism: loyalty to a nation rather than a monarchy. This also resulted in conscription of itinerates; those unable to secure comfortable wages were recruited into military service. Thus, between the French Revolution of 1789 and the 1870–1 Franco-Prussian War, European armies were understood to be

made up of desperate men who couldn't find a better job and incompetent officers who couldn't inherit a better place; though a useful tool for empire building, the army became a patchwork institution employing thousands and creating its own infrastructure. Total war can be linked directly to technical innovation and the conscript army, both of which swept up Woyzeck.

Once drafted into service, Woyzeck was essentially enslaved, his free will eviscerated and his autonomy annulled. Woyzeck's position as a soldier was part of this larger historical condition for the working class; he joined the military because little else was available. The mass mobilization of the Napoleonic era grew out of a Western cultural and technological development: war was now brutal, fought with new technology, pitched battles using conscripted soldiers as cannon fodder. David Bell contends that during this post-Napoleonic period "the 'military' came enduringly to be defined as a separate sphere of society, largely distinct from the 'civilian' one."<sup>98</sup> Poor, uneducated, and socially disenfranchised, Woyzeck is at the mercy of the military. His pain is inexpressible; he is, George Steiner notes, stripped of words: "Woyzeck's powers of speech fall drastically short of the depth of his anguish," where his "agonized spirit hammers in vain on the doors of language."<sup>99</sup> The magnitude of his helplessness undermines any attempt to explain his condition; yet Steiner is not entirely correct: Woyzeck occasionally expresses his anguish with pellucid clarity.

*Woyzeck* is the first drama of the underclass and his inarticulateness (and self-awareness of this fact) is expressed with razor-sharp insight. Despite his downtrodden condition, lack of education, and the awkwardness of his language (the stuttering and stammering), Woyzeck is aware of the futility of his circumstances. Like Danton, Büchner has created a character cognizant of his hopelessness. In a scene where Woyzeck is shaving and cutting the Captain's hair, the sanctimonious Captain berates Woyzeck for having a child out of wedlock with the prostitute Marie. Woyzeck replies:

WOYZECK: Captain, sir, the good Lord's not going to look at a poor worm just because they said Amen over it before they went at it. The Lord said: "Suffer little children to come unto me."

CAPTAIN: What's that you said? What kind of strange answer's that? You're confusing me with your answers! (110).

Strange answer indeed, yet Woyzeck understands the irony of his plight. The hypocrisy of marriage and the sanctioning of the state's religion mean little amidst poverty. In remarks anticipating Marx's *Communist Manifesto* and twentieth-century social dramas, Woyzeck expresses conditions that are perhaps the most lyrical and profound on behalf of the working class ever written.

It's us poor people that ... You see, Captain, sir ... Money, money! Whoever hasn't got money ... Well, who's got morals when he's bringing something like

me into the world? We're flesh and blood, too. Our kind is miserable only once: in this world and in the next. I think if we ever got to Heaven we'd have to help with the thunder (110).

This speech is remarkable for several reasons. First is Woyzeck's prescient understanding of money. Not just cash, but what money means socially, politically, and ethically; as Marx noted (see quote above), money has the power to change reality and ethics. Second is his keen, self-effacing irony about his proletarian condition: even God partakes in the joke at his expense. He is a proletarian not only for life but into the "after" life. Büchner, the socialist critic Georg Lukács observes, "portrays Woyzeck's physical and ideological helplessness in the face of his oppressors and exploiters; in other words, real social helplessness, depicted from the viewpoint of existence, the essence of which Woyzeck at least senses, even if he does not clearly perceive it."<sup>100</sup> It is not merely Woyzeck's obsession with money that matters, but a modern concept of money in which possession preempts and renders unnecessary all pre-monetary forms of social relationships: reciprocity, redistribution, kinship, ritual, family, and morality. Money allows one to fulfill several needs, avoid moral turpitude, and reflect on philosophical conditions. For Büchner money provides the power to enlarge one's knowledge, assist in reflection, and override others' judgment.

Amongst artists and thinkers in Germany during the 1830's there arose interest in the "social question." Social observers, journalists, and intellectuals grew increasingly concerned with the pitiable plight of the lower classes. What was a steady condition of misery for peasants grew into mass impoverishment and homelessness. The lower classes of the 1830s suffered from the combination of rapid population growth and sluggish industrialization; the lagging economy in the towns and cities of Germany was the result of a transition from agrarian to industrial society. The countryside witnessed a mounting population experiencing the emancipation of peasant serfdom; this newfound freedom was a relief from the burden of serf-slavery, but it left the serfs with few options. Cast into the cities these landless and penniless people became a new class of urban workers (the proletariat) without connection to the old guard, laboring in inadequate factories, and bereft of sufficient income. The pre-modern peasant was deemed a part of the lower order of society, existing in a relatively static and stable context; the innate poverty of this class was the consequence of their supposed original sinful condition. But at least they were cared for by feudal structure and organization. By contrast, the new proletariat was conceived of as a social class produced by economic forces of labor and wage relationships. The roots of this transition enabled a sense of economic dislocation, the rise of competitiveness, and the demise of earlier forms of social sympathy and solidarity. Capitalism's demand for individualism swept away the old order of

feudal unity; the new class of poor was completely cast adrift. By the 1830s the topic of pauperism and the new laboring poor was not only exclusive of Germany, it impacted the debates globally. Poverty was not new, but the context and source of poverty was, and this new proletariat experienced nothing less than a traumatic condition.

Büchner condemns this modernized world for its alienation and de-humanization. Writing about the anti-heroism of the play, Victor Brombert notes that the tragic dimension of *Woyzeck* surfaces in “the passion of the protagonist – both in the etymological sense of suffering and the more ordinary sense of violent emotion – that retrieves tragedy in the antiheroic sense.” For Brombert, “the most telling moment is doubtless the instant of revelation of raw sexuality as Woyzeck, standing outside the open window of the inn, watches Marie and the Drum Major dance by in a symbolic embrace to the accompaniment of Marie’s repeated goading: ‘On and on. On and on.’”<sup>101</sup> Woyzeck experiences trauma by leading a uniquely modern solitary existence. Büchner, writes Julian Hilton, “is not showing us a naturalistic, step-by-step alienation of a social misfit, but initiating us into what it feels like to be in alienating situations, the images and behaviour those situations induce.”<sup>102</sup> Woyzeck’s inexorably solitary existence demarcates his modernism: disconnected from human commerce, except when those eager to exploit their own needs use him as a guinea pig, he represents a traumatic change of dramatic depictions – the isolated protagonist cast adrift – and modern artists sought to identify these traumatic moments of alienation.



# Part I

## Trauma Drama

*When I speak of modern drama, I naturally refer only to those regions of dramatic literature that, sparsely inhabited as they may be, are yet essentially new. Down below, in the ordinary theatre, ordinary and traditional drama is doubtless yielding slowly to the influence of the vanguard; but it were idle to wait for the laggards when we have the pioneers at our call.*

– Maurice Maeterlinck<sup>103</sup>

Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, and Anton Chekhov were hailed not only for their groundbreaking techniques and glittering display of theatricality, but also for their complexity – the density, compelling allusiveness, and passion exhibited in their plays. Ibsen’s quest for freedom in the mind as well as in society often drove his characters to extreme risks and dangerous rebellion. Strindberg’s stake in naturalistic drama, and his assault on the closed melodramatic form, were the most graphic contributions to modern drama. His post-Inferno plays (the period after his nervous breakdown) involved a transformation in the way drama transpired. John Fletcher and James McFarlane write that if “Ibsen is the origin and impetus [of modern drama], Strindberg is its astonishing pre-figuration. Where Ibsen made penetration, broke through in unexpected directions and took himself and those who responded to him into new and previously unexplored territories of dramatic experience, Strindberg by a kind of visionary enactment anticipated the then still indeterminate future of Modernist drama.”<sup>104</sup> Chekhov’s irony and understanding of the human condition reverberates straight through to Beckett and beyond.

Among the many modernist contributions of these three playwrights are their uncanny and creative fusions of social realism and artistic abstraction that derive from the juxtaposition of the representational and the symbolic. Their

modernism stems from the reliance on realism as a grounding for character and setting; and the use of metaphors (cherry orchards, ghost sonatas, and wild ducks, among others) as methods of reaching beyond mimetic reflection. Chekhov was gentler, perhaps because he possessed the best sense of humor; for Chekhov the political can also be absurd and taking yourself too seriously can be risible. If Ibsen and Strindberg's characters burned with subjective intensity, fought idealistically for their political aims, and charged the ramparts of new dramatic forms, Chekhov was taciturn. With his subaqueous palette, Chekhov's characters luxuriate in a kind of burned-out cosmic depression, the way one does after living on too much caffeine and dreams. But he, too, had a knack for being misunderstood and evoked initial confusion in critics and audiences.

What they shared was an awareness of modernism's shock – the psychic transformation from old world values to a new age of bourgeois consumerism and egalitarian social relations. Trauma and modernism are interlocking categories, and these three playwrights understood the connection. Trauma, Sigmund Freud writes, is “any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield.”<sup>105</sup> These three playwrights grasped the central place of shock and trauma occurring in a rapidly changing society. They understood the trauma overtaking the late nineteenth century not as a single, monolithic instant wielded by certain sectors of society, but rather as a complex and systemic operation that happens in multiple circumstances and dramatic occasions. The formation of a bourgeois consumerism, progress, and conquest conflicted with old world values. If the Renaissance credo was Christian humanism, the Enlightenment secular reason and communitarian relations, and Romanticism creative imagination, modernism was *traumatic rupture*; power shifting from aristocracy to the mercantile class, from rural to urban, and rising technology evident in everyday experience.

Trauma reflects a shattering nature often unavailable to conscious recollection and understanding. Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov replicate the murky patterns of human consciousness, the inchoate barrage of impressions, impulses, memories, and eruptions of anguish and desire that form the thought patterns of modern culture. They tried to reverse the traditional consensus of nineteenth-century drama; instead of rendering the social landscape by a searchlight of melodrama's sweeping surfaces, they prowled the labyrinthine cubicles of the inner self, the dehiscence of everyday existence. They observed the temporal condition of trauma, the rupture with traditional patterns characteristic of a progressive, technologically advanced, metropolitan-centered world. The industrial revolution created a new way of experiencing life, and Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov bear witness to a reconditioning of the psyche, a redirection of the eddies and flow of human discourse moving in language and time, and a shattering of all that was held true and certain.



Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov never completely abandoned the structural framework of melodrama, but worked within it and simultaneously rebelled against its causal narrative progression and rigid moral clarity. Instead of predictability, the three dramatists illuminated a dreamlike pulse of modernism, prying open the logical coherence of surfaces in order to illustrate a messier interiority and conflicting morality. Their theatrical space – dialogue, situations, relationships, and stage settings – gyrates with alternatives, spontaneity, and complexity unmatched by their contemporaries. They took a domestic turn, but not in any conventional way; like the Impressionist painters, they mixed realistic detail with the darkening effects of Impressionist abstractions. They demonstrated reality to the audience, but also transformed it – uncovered multiple ways of perceiving it. Their dramas were hardly one-dimensional, photographic reproductions of events common to melodrama but instead probative inquiries into the methods of perception, the multiple effects of dramatic action, and the stupefying complexity of moral decisions. The result of their plays is a powerful shift in the language of form and the meaning of content, congeries of disparate philosophical and psychological inclinations of modernism. They overturned the nineteenth-century style of melodrama that was essentially predictable, stolid, and sentimental, by creating explosive challenges to conventional wisdom.

The basic structure of melodrama was the *pièce bien faite*, the well-made play used ubiquitously by dramatist Emile Augier, August von Kotzebue, Victorien Sardou, and Alexander Dumas *fils*, but none more so than Augustin-Eugène Scribe (1791–1861). Scribe's prodigious output of plays, vaudeville, libretti, and operas (totaling 374) influenced comedies, musicals, and dramas. Stephen Stanton describes the basic features of the well-made play: the plot is based on a secret known to the audience but withheld from certain characters; through the course of the play intrigues are uncovered incrementally; the endings create a climactic scene unmasking the fraudulent character, restoring moral order and good fortune to the suffering hero (a protagonist whose plight we have been made to sympathize); an ensuing pattern of increasingly intense action and suspense, instigating a series of reversals, or ups and downs (the Aristotelian term is *peripeteia*, change in fortune), which precipitate the fate of the hero; the conclusion of a *scène à faire*, or obligatory scene, marking the hero's lowest and highest points; a central misunderstanding leading to *quid pro quo* (something for something) in which things become clarified, followed by a logical and credible *dénouement* (ending). Finally, the overall action pattern is causal and logical; in other words, everything appeals to a rational sequence of motivation and justification. As Stanton remarks, "Scribe invented nothing. He used the technical methods of all the great writers of comedy [and intrigue], but he kept all their tricks in use all the time in his plays. He was the theatrical juggler supreme."<sup>106</sup> Scribe was a superb craftsman, his contributions hardwired

into the fabric of modern drama. Intrigue, suspense, and psychology from the nineteenth century onward owe virtually everything to this clichéd but viable form. Gustav Freytag's *Technique of Drama* (1863) was also a playwriting handbook that took hold among melodramatic writers. Freytag prescribed five parts of a good melodrama: introduction, where the exposition and protagonist are revealed; the rising action brought forth by an antagonist; the dialectical clash of protagonist and antagonist leading to a climax; the return, or fall of the event, and the catastrophe, or consequence of the conflict.<sup>107</sup> The art of producing entanglements and tension, conflicts and delaying their unraveling, sharp twists and turns, startling surprises that unveil the *coups de théâtre*, the mathematical symmetry of rising and falling action, and the sensational curtain line that would end each act, was hardly original nor did it end in the nineteenth century (television soap operas and prime-time melodramas owe everything to this form). The form can be traced to Shakespeare, Molière, *commedia dell' arte*, and the medieval farce. During the nineteenth century, the modern boulevards rolled out the assembly-line production of melodramas that followed the formula to great success. George Bernard Shaw decried these pre-packaged melodramas, yet he, too, used the patterns to construct his plays.

To facilitate legibility, melodrama relies on over-determined psychological and emotional transparency and revelatory surface expression. By contrast, Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov emphasized the unfocused, elliptical, and oblique in human interaction; while melodrama practiced the art of clarifying, these three playwrights created shifting surfaces, fleeting expression, and breakdown of clarity. Identity for them is a loose bundle of unorganized energies and possibilities; the past may try to sustain its organizing grip, but the modern age destabilizes any certainty of self. Fumbling inarticulateness, agitated silence, and stuttering emotion replaced linguistic lucidity and emotional coherence. Arnold Weinstein posits that Ibsen staged the “death knell for his nineteenth-century bourgeois culture, showing how much rot existed in its foundations, displaying how its central conventions of marriage and work were riddled with disease, proving how *lying* – to others, to oneself – was the principal antic of creatures in culture.” If Ibsen presided over a dying culture, then Strindberg would be the visionary, “the sometimes brutal, sometimes startling experimenter whose personal breakdowns were always fertile for his art, whose later work explodes with new horizons, making the stage hospitable to dream and displacement, cavalierly rearranging the laws of time and space, looking straight into Surrealism and the twentieth century itself, a time of both gutter wars and formal invention.”<sup>108</sup> Chekhov rejected any pretensions of supreme answers to life's questions; like Ibsen he abhorred lies, and like Strindberg he looked into the eyes of his characters' psyche without blinking. According to Lionel Abel, Chekhov, “powerfully influenced

by Tolstoy's insistence on utter truthfulness, deliberately softened the oppositions in his plays, toned down their climaxes, broke up the structure of the 'well-made play,' and "eliminated altogether any suggestion that what happened to his characters happened because of fate."<sup>109</sup> No one was beyond his affection; no one was spared lampooning; and his plays reflect the modernist notion of time's effect on characters, that same preoccupation in the doorstep novels of Tolstoy. Chekhov aimed his sharpest wit against pretentiousness, the puffery of oversized egos; yet even in his most shortsighted and noxious characters he left room for compassion. His great talent lies not in grand themes but in minutia, what Gustav Flaubert called art that relies not on "the great disasters," but rather on "the small ones of which one has to be afraid."<sup>110</sup> Likewise Ibsen and Strindberg, he observed the decay of the aristocracy and the rise of the bourgeoisie. Lopakhin's purchase of Lyubov Andreevna's land and turning it into summer cottages in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* is emblematic of the global transition from wealthy, aristocratic landowners to capitalist dispensers of private property. Atavistic ownership of land now became dissected and bartered, used in the marketplace as one of many exchange commodities. But unlike his two great contemporaries, Chekhov reserved harsh and systematic judgment. Chekhov's talent, writes Maurice Valency, "lay in the sensitive depiction of the life around him, the physical and psychic landscape in which he lived."<sup>111</sup> Rather than sharp spotlight, his palette is closer to the Impressionists, with fuzzier moral lines and softer shadings. Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov receive the greatest attention in this book because they establish modernism as a fixture and "value" in drama, creating a foundation that every playwright has, to one degree or another, emulated since.



# Chapter 2

## The Price of Freedom

*Kant was virtually intoxicated by the idea of human freedom.*

– Isaiah Berlin<sup>112</sup>

*I am free! I am free! I am free!  
No more living in cages for me!  
I am free as a bird! I am free!*

– Ibsen, *When We Dead Awaken*<sup>113</sup>

Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) lived enigmatically. He hated the status quo; yet he was a medal chaser. He defended women’s rights; yet he was probably a philanderer. He read voraciously and knew virtually every important thinker of his age; yet he denied being influenced by anyone. He supported human rights; yet he viewed society as a mob of trolls clamoring for conformity. He preached non-conformity; yet he was fiercely disciplined, writing a new play virtually every two years. He was an innovator of drama; yet his dramatic form is wedded to nineteenth-century melodrama. His reputation was in drama; yet he wanted to be a poet. On his deathbed, after experiencing two debilitating strokes, it was assumed he was no longer coherent. Yet at his last moment, lapsed in a coma, he sat up just before his death and said “*Tvertimod!*” – “On the contrary!”<sup>114</sup>

Born in the Norwegian coastal town of Skien of middle-class parents, his father, a merchant, abruptly fell on hard times and the family was impoverished. At sixteen, he worked as a pharmacist’s assistant in Grimsted. There he wrote poetry. In 1850, he took his matriculating exam in medicine but failed Greek and mathematics; from then on he turned his attention to writing. His early work brought him scant success. In 1851, he accepted a job as dramaturge

for the Norwegian Theatre of Bergen, a post whose duties entailed writing for the residential company, directing, and consulting on theatrical matters. Despite the fact that he considered the work tedious, the period of gestation through apprenticeship and directing provided a firm foundation for his mature plays. His early works were conventional history plays, rustic folk dramas, and farces. He wrote two powerful dramatic-epic poems, *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*. It was in the final twenty years of his career, from 1879 to 1899, that his plays changed the course of modern drama.

Ibsen shared much with the philosopher Immanuel Kant, in that each wanted to liberate human freedom from social and mental constraints. But he also had his doubts about humanity; like Shakespeare, he abhorred mob mentality, group conformity, and xenophobia. In 1877, in response to critics of his play *Pillars of Society*, he wrote a letter to King Oscar II, expressing his intensions: “to lead the vision and the thoughts of the public in a different direction and to show that untruth does not reside in institutions but in the individuals themselves within the community; that it is the inner life of the people, the life of the mind, which has to be purified and liberated; that it is not the external liberties which are to be desired but on the contrary a personal and cultural liberation, and that this can only be acquired and taken possession of by the individual himself, in that his conduct has truth as its basis and point of departure.”<sup>115</sup> Ibsen referred to oppressive conformity as “trolls” – symbolic of guilt, convention, and rules. Ibsen, it would seem, followed Kant’s Enlightenment dictum (borrowed from Horace), “*Sapere aude!* [dare to know]. Have courage to use your own reason!”<sup>116</sup> For Ibsen and Kant, that some idea or convention has existed for ages tells us nothing about its value; the past is dead and the living should use its powers of analysis to sweep aside existing arrangements and taboos. For modern intellectuals and artists, writes Stephen Kerns, the historical past “created institutions that had lasted for centuries; and it limited their sense of autonomy.” Rather than imitate the past or live “regulated by social conventions that were conceived in the distant past over which they had no control,” they wanted “freedom.”<sup>117</sup>

Ibsen’s plays demonstrate that we are defined by the concerns for what we should do, acting in a way consonant with moral good. Freedom for Ibsen lies at the root of moral obligations; but with it comes responsibility. We are not free chaotically: our actions create reactions, and our moral obligations are to others as well as ourselves. Moral duty is the flipside of autonomy: a person is obliged to act on “categorical imperatives,” Kant’s term for principles that could be willed into universal laws. Ibsen went further than Kant; he took the concept into the realm of the personal. His emphasis on autonomy meant that conventions are wrong but not because they fulfill some universally ill-conceived law (being a wife, mother, or citizen, for example), but rather

because the individual must act qua individual; Nora must slam the door and leave her family because it is the ethical thing to do *for all humans to do*. Rousseau opens his *Social Contract* with “Man is born free; but he is everywhere in chains,”<sup>118</sup> and Ibsen suggests that man is not free unless he frees the chains from within. As much as Strindberg believed we are fundamentally in the dark about our motives and actions, Ibsen saw human beings as open to reason and logic, even if the struggle for autonomy may take us down a painful and sometimes misguided and selfish path. In virtually every play Ibsen wrote during his “realist period” – the twelve-play cycle from 1879 to 1899 – he creates a “space of freedom,” a use of the stage to investigate the struggle for freedom through the conflicts of obligations and ideals.

Ibsen was influenced by an obscure German intellectual Hermann Hettner and his book *Das moderne Drama: Ästhetische Untersuchungen* (1852). According to one of Ibsen’s earliest biographers, Halvdan Koht, Hettner’s work appeared to Ibsen as “a manifesto and a program for reform in the theatre,”<sup>119</sup> and Rüdiger Bernhardt adds that *Das moderne Drama* was Ibsen’s “awakening to insight (*Erkenntniszuwachs*).”<sup>120</sup> Marvin Carlson contends that, like Wagner, Marx, and Engels, Hettner’s *Das moderne Drama* advanced the tragedy of ideas, in which drama captures internal conflict of character, “but it is caused not by weaknesses or deficiencies in the character, as in *Wallenstein* or *Hamlet*, but by conflicting obligations and ideals.” A quarter-century later, Carlson adds, “another young writer, Henrik Ibsen, was strongly impressed by Hettner’s book and carried its ideas to brilliant fruition.”<sup>121</sup>

Hettner and Ibsen came of age in the 1850s during a period of extreme political polarization on what constituted art in general and drama in particular. The era followed closely on the heels of the failed revolution of 1848 and was especially influenced by Hegel’s philosophy. Hegel sought a resolution of polar extremes occurring in the world mentally rather than in reality. He called this goal the “Absolute Spirit.” The dialectical conflicts of modern society would be, for Hegel, resolved in a monumental effort to absorb opposing views through a mental process, what he called “sublation.” The Absolute Spirit would sublimate conflicts by accepting both sides of an argument and derive a synthesis through rational processes. For Hegel, dramas center less on internal flaws of the protagonist than on intractable conflicts. The distinctive suffering derives from external actions that precipitate a reaction creating a collision of incommensurable wills, purposes, and forces. Dramatic action, he says, “depends on conditions of collision, human passion and character, and leads therefore to actions and reactions, which in their turn call for some further resolution of conflict and disruption.”<sup>122</sup> Conflicts of family and state, as exemplified by Sophocles’s *Antigone*, represent modern drama for Hegel; plays that depict conflicts by relentlessly intransigent one-sided positions constitute the grounds of collision. According to A. C. Bradley, Hegel believed that the

“competing forces are both in themselves rightful, and so far the claims of each is equally justified; but the right of each is pushed into a wrong, because it ignores the right of the other, and demands that absolute sway which belongs to neither alone, but to the whole of which each is but a part.”<sup>123</sup>

The leftwing philosophers of the period (Marx among them) accepted Hegel’s claims of world-historical conflicts but rejected his rational approach,<sup>124</sup> arguing that this process denied matters of concrete reality. For this group, Hegel’s synthesis must occur in actuality and not in the mind. Consciousness, said Marx, is rooted in concrete existence; “Its premises are men, not in any fantastic isolation or rigidity, but in their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions.”<sup>125</sup> The Left Hegelians claimed that the Absolute Spirit must be converted into corporeal existence. According to Peter Uwe Hohendahl, “By replacing Hegel’s concept of reason with a concept of human self-consciousness, Hegel’s radical students make man the measure of reason, and history the field in which human reason actively realizes itself.” Hegel doesn’t deny human passions as a motive for human activity; but for the leftwing Hegelians, Hohendahl adds, “history has become an imminent process in which consciousness is, in the forms of religion, science, and art, the motor of a movement” no longer beholding to metaphysical devices.<sup>126</sup>

What distinguished the Young Hegelian Hettner (and Friedrich Hebbel) from his contemporaries was his historical consciousness vis-à-vis the dramatic texts and his emphasis on detailed psychological basis for characters.<sup>127</sup> *Das moderne Drama* examined the relationship of classical Greek and Shakespearean drama to modern drama; the manner in which history affects ordinary people; the decreasing importance of destiny and religion and the rising importance of psychology in drama; and ideas as they relate to everyday circumstances. Hettner, Alfred Schwarz remarks, “recognized the possibility of developing a modern dramatic tragedy on the model of classical tragedy, provided its conflicts embodied serious social questions, principles, and views that were naturally opposed, and provided the necessary course of such real conflicts was pursued without compromise.”<sup>128</sup> For Hettner, likewise the playwright Hebbel, ideas were the foundation of the Hegelian historical dialectic; however, this dialectic ought to focus on ordinary citizenry.<sup>129</sup> Modern drama, Hettner maintained, “is like any other drama; only, it does not search for its protagonists on the throne of kings or from the heights of history, but rather in the lower circles of life, amid plain and simple relationships. Therefore, if the modern era is distinguishable from the Ancients and Middle Ages, it ought to employ the individual as an individual, through the impartial recognition of the purely human in everyone, regardless of stature or rank.” Consequently, “each person has his fate, the neediest Bürger as well as the most powerful king.”<sup>130</sup> In Greek drama, powerful forces were pitted against the individual; inscrutable Gods, ancient curses, and rigid oracles determined the outcome.



The protagonist fought valiantly and audiences admired their nobility and resourcefulness, but in the end were sanguine about the tragic certainty of their demise. Ancient and Elizabethan drama celebrated the courageous human victim; audiences empathized with Oedipus and Hamlet, characters fighting the good fight even as inevitable fate tore them apart. Medieval drama idealized Christ, depicting the dialectical struggle of Christian moral virtues versus Satanic vices. The dialectical conflicts were unambiguous, good and bad angels engaged in a tug-of-war, what Wole Soyinka calls medieval dramas' reliance on "religious mythology" that "created a constant *microcosmos* by its spatial correspondence of good and evil, angels and demons, paradise, purgatory and hell."<sup>131</sup> For Hettner, modern drama ought to be more skeptical of moral certainty and live "on the ground" in the daily struggles against alcoholism, syphilis, poverty, social pressures, industry, business, slavery, politics, and war – the "stuff" of modern social drama. The dialectical conflict in drama is the same as it always was, Hettner says, but destiny is now sociological rather than eschatological, and moral certainty gives way to the miasmatic confluence of modernist passion and reason.

In 1851 Ibsen was commissioned by the Norwegian National Theatre to observe theatres throughout Europe. The goal was for him to return to Norway better educated and equipped to guide Norwegian theatre into the modern age. During the sojourn, Theodore Jorgenson contends, Ibsen acquired Hettner's book in 1852 and "it seems to have been his constant companion while abroad." Hettner had written the book, Jorgenson says, "from the viewpoint of a reformer, not a philosophical scholar." Shakespeare for Hettner, Jorgenson says, "had been concerned only with the reproduction of history and the writing of poetry. He had not thought it necessary to bring the historical subject matter into any living relationship with the present"; Hettner "insisted that the genuine historical drama must begin with the present. The men and women of our day must be able to see themselves in the players on the stage." The fact that the subject matter is history must not prevent the spectator from recognizing their problems: "the play must be true to history and at the same time psychologically applicable to the present moment." Hettner "expressed a belief that such a drama was yet in the offering, but we may surmise that Henrik Ibsen thought otherwise when he read the book."<sup>132</sup>

For Hettner, modern drama is ideally located midway between the investigation of character development and contemporary social conflicts, the background events sharing focus with the character's complexity. Audiences witness the protagonist caught between personal needs and societal demands, erotic desires and political pressures, social necessity and individual freedom, laying bare society's causal network and its effect on individuals. Hettner maintains an affinity for the struggles of ordinary life, asking, "should we ignore the deep sorrow, which runs through all our moral and social

relationships, and shut out stubborn hearts and eyes which have sense and feelings for that which emerges for the moment as the open struggle of the highest state principles?"<sup>133</sup> Shakespeare had it right to focus on history, but Hettner asks: "Should only kings or meaningful historical protagonists have meaningful destiny of world-shaking proportion? And can there not exist great and immense destiny in the narrowness of domestic circles, rather than only humble misery and prosaic squalor?"<sup>134</sup> For modern drama to flourish it must be a history from the bottom up. From here it is not hard to observe the conditions of Nora in *A Doll's House* and the ensuing landscape of modern drama. Errol Durbach asserts that in *A Doll's House*, Ibsen establishes "a decisive shift in tragic style from the antiquarian re-creation of an unverifiable past to the normative values of the everyday, from *Catiline* and *The Vikings at Helgeland* to the tragedy of the lady next door. It is no longer the aristocratic exemplar of greatness who models man's tragic experience but the unexceptional and the everyday. After *A Doll's House* we are challenged to seek out heroic magnitude in ordinary and day-to-day existence and recognize the universality of Nora's experience."<sup>135</sup>

History, disengaged from myth, factors into daily life. Hettner recommended to playwrights that they move away from romanticism, with its proclivity for bombastic historical melodrama, and towards modernism by way of realistic dialogue and an emphasis on the nuances of everyday life. Hettner infused contemporaneity into the historical drama by urging playwrights to see drama as a forum for current social conditions rather than pageants celebrating this emperor or that (Napoleonic plays, for instance, which were popular in the nineteenth century). Tom Driver notes that *Das moderne Drama* "made it possible for Ibsen to connect his interest in the historical play with the moral and psychological tensions of his own inner life," enabling him "to existentialize history."<sup>136</sup> Ibsen makes this clear in a letter to Ludwig Passarge in 1880: "Every new work has had as its purpose for me that of serving as a process of spiritual emancipation and purification; for no man ever stands quite without some responsibility and some complicity in the society to which he belongs. That was why I once wrote the following lines in a copy of one of my books as a dedication: To *live* is to war with trolls/In the vault of the heart and the brain/To *write*: that is to sit/in judgment over one's self."<sup>137</sup>

Hettner's poetics for modern drama arose from what he called "the dialectics of principles of moral conflicts."<sup>138</sup> He rejected the serendipities of fate embodied in melodrama – a sudden letter filled with long-lost money, or an act of divine grace serving to rescue the protagonist – instead emphasizing action underlying social and psychological motivation. Events in life might be subject to fate, but drama must exorcise happenstance and replace it with necessity; the power of drama can only be stimulating if characters are psychologically motivated. History moves through causality; contemporary events, such as

women's emancipation or freedom from slavery, are historical movements motivated by social freedom. Hettner argued that drama is only a conflict "moved by its innermost essence" and draws the conclusion that "the middle-class social drama is now more historical than the historical drama itself."<sup>139</sup> Ibsen's biographer Michael Meyer asserts that Ibsen's contributions to modern drama were threefold: first, he "was the first man to show that high tragedy could be written about ordinary people and in ordinary everyday prose." Second, "he threw out the old artificialities of plot" such as "mistaken identities, overheard conversations, intercepted letters, and the like." Finally, "he developed the art of prose dialogue to a degree of refinement which has never been surpassed."<sup>140</sup> These are the product of Hettner's advice: he recognized that the course of modern drama had to move unrestricted within the center of social crisis and urged playwrights to understand that since the stage rests on the liveliest social reciprocity with the audience, it must reject the hollow affectation of manufactured and untruthful idealism derived from romanticism and melodrama, uncovering instead the complex social networks repressing human freedom.

Ibsen did not begin his dramatic output with social drama in mind. His early works were poetic, taken mostly from Norwegian themes or romantic dramas. His most famous was *Peer Gynt* (1867), an epic poem chronicling the protagonist's continent-spanning adventures. Peer was a Norwegian folk anti-hero, an alternately compelling and repulsive megalomaniac. Peer is a liar, cheat, and opportunist, but simultaneously charming, clever, and outrageous. At the end of this long play Peer is a broken old man in search of spiritual salvation, given to internal speeches no less insightful than his predecessor, Hamlet. The play makes imaginative leaps from rustic folktale to existential inquiry, located in places and settings that require imaginative leaps by the audience as well. Influenced by Dante's *Inferno* and Goethe's *Faust*, Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* is a soul-searching journey, a spiritual quest embodying selfish desires and couched in phantasmagoria. As George Bernard Shaw points out, Peer Gynt is like Cervantes's Don Quixote, in that however "ridiculous Don Quixote makes himself, you cannot dislike or despise him, much less think that it would have been better for him to have been a Philistine like Sancho; and Peer Gynt, selfish rascal as he is, is not unlovable."<sup>141</sup> If Ibsen had never written another play after *Peer Gynt* his fame would have been assured. But by the late 1870s, he abandoned the poetic genre, turning his attention to social realism.

### *A Doll's House*

In his preliminary notes to *A Doll's House* (1879), titled "Notes for the Tragedy of Modern Times" (Oct. 19, 1878), Ibsen wrote that "There are two kinds of moral laws, two kinds of conscience, one in man and a completely different one

in woman. They do not understand each other; but in matters of practical living the woman is judged by man's laws, as if she were not a woman but a man." Ibsen does not weigh the value of one law over the other, but rather sees injustice in the fact that only one is prized while the other devalued. Consequently, "A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society, it is an exclusively male society with laws drafted by men, and with counsel and judges who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view."<sup>142</sup> *A Doll's House* takes place in the home of Torvald Helmer, his wife, Nora, and their three children. The setting is Christmas, the backdrop is the serene home of Torvald, a banker with an unimpeachable reputation. Nora appears at first glance to be dimwitted: she eats macaroons, raises the children, dances the tarantella for Torvald's erotic desires, but is largely denied access to household business affairs. Her use of language is child-like, something that Torvald accentuates condescendingly. But the play's ominous foreboding can be deciphered by the title, *Et Dukkehjem*. The term in Norwegian implies, according to Errol Durbach, "a snug haven, a world of private domestic ideals presided over by a paragon of wifely duties, populated by perfect doll children, and protected by a model paterfamilias."<sup>143</sup> Underneath the cozy template lies a secret: Nora forged a document to obtain a loan to support her husband during his illness. Unable to produce collateral on her own, she forged her father's name to secure the loan and since then has been secretly repaying it to a bank clerk, Nils Krogstad. Nora's father died two days before the date of the signature. The desperate Krogstad, who was in collusion with Nora for the loan, is now out of favor with Torvald; in danger of losing his job, he pleads his case to Nora. Having something to hold over her, he threatens exposure unless she persuades her husband to let him remain employed at the bank.

On the surface the play is straightforward melodrama. But Ibsen uses the form to create a theatre of social ideas. The conflict between ethical claims to justice creates a dramatic tension: there is Torvald's conventional moral order and Nora's right to do whatever necessary to survive in a world that places women on a rung below. Brian Johnston maintains that the dialectical action of *A Doll's House* "quite clearly depicts that collision between the law of man and the law of woman described by Hegel as the first inevitable and fundamental conflict of the ethical community." The action that brings this conflict into the open, he says, "is an act that Nora committed from love and desire to save her husband's life but that, as in *Antigone*, the state brands as a crime."<sup>144</sup> For Ibsen the very stage space is a frame through which he creates a powerful artistic message: a match between two strong wills representing two moral codes.

The "doll house" is the very feature of a home; the bric-a-brac of a middle-class parlor resides in the Torvald abode. In an 1881 autobiographic fragment, Ibsen reveals the influence of home – physically and conceptually – on his psyche: "I was born in a house by the market-place, Stockmann's house,

as it was then called. The house faced the entrance to the church with its high flight of steps and its imposing tower. On the right of the church stood the town pillory and on the left was the town hall with its gaol and its 'mad house.' The fourth side of the market-place was formed by the grammar school and the ordinary school. The church stood free in the middle." For Ibsen, "This prospect was the first view of the world to present itself to my eyes. Buildings everywhere, nothing green; no open country."<sup>145</sup> These remarks illuminate a host of themes in Ibsen's plays: church in *The Master Builder*; the importance of "visualizing"; the moral edifice of jails, pillories, and "mad" houses; and the predominance of "house" as it contains Nora. *A Doll's House*, like many of his plays, is acutely aware of the stage space as a "house." Franz Kafka wrote in his diary (Oct. 27, 1911) that modern drama is a product of atrabilious yet stalwart humanity in a home that "hovers in the air, but not as a roof that storms bear away, but like an entire building (*eine ganzes Gebäude*) whose foundation walls have been ripped up from the earth with a force that is still today close to madness (*noch dem Irrsinn*)."<sup>146</sup> This metaphor describes Ibsen's sense of home as a foundation ripped up with seismic intensity and consequences.

Ibsen illustrates a number of different concepts of space: space as a location (a doll house); space as a social construction within limits, boundaries, and corollary experiences (Rosmer's home); and space as a conflict between illusions and representations (the attic in *The Wild Duck*), to name just a few of his many metaphors. He takes as his point of departure the assertion that the constraints and freedom of movement in the bourgeois parlor result in a very different configurations for women and men; even when they can, in the company of an escort, move out of the private space into public view, women cannot enjoy the freedom of incognito men experience in institutional spaces as banks, social clubs, and the streets. Women have to be cognizant of their reputations (Hedda Gabler), and consequently are debarred from public places unless they are put on display for consumption as sexual objects (Miss Diana's boudoir in *Hedda Gabler*).

During the late nineteenth century, the middle-class home was associated with conformity, tradition, family, and marriage; but Ibsen considered the home as a threshold of unsettlement and a site for rebellion against monogamy, sexism, and social propriety. A house, for many Ibsen characters, has memories, a space where not only things, but images, collect. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard argues that "our home is our corner of the world." It is more than a structure; the house, he says, "shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace."<sup>147</sup> *A Doll's House* is literally and symbolically a house recreated onstage; all the detritus of middle-class life are situated here, plus all the accoutrement of a doll's abode. It is also, as Bachelard might say, a house of dreams, what Nora calls *det vidunderlige*, the "most wonderful thing," carrying ancient resonance of mysticism, Christianity,

and paganism. Ibsen's aim in this play and in others is the moral aspiration to live freely, which, in the confines of this house, is unattainable for Nora. To live freely for Ibsen ("free of trolls") is to participate in a life that is self-imposed and self-regulated. Nora's actions are vilified by the potentate Torvald, whose truculent insistence on overriding Nora's sacrifices through his pristine virtues makes Nora's life insufferable. His truths are inadequate for Nora; they exist in a pre-modern era inappropriate for her modern sensibilities. Brian Johnson asserts that in every play in the realist cycle "we find a situation existing in untruth or inadequate truth: how, under the impact of a shock (usually a sudden arrival from the past), the contradictory aspects of this given situation are brought into conflict, forced to reveal their inconsistencies; how, as the conflict progresses, a more and more adequate truth of the situation emerges – even if this proves a painful and destructive truth – until, at the end of the play, we have the complete and logical development of what was inherent but concealed at the beginning. The given reality of the beginning of the play is tested and found wanting by realities that both transcend and conflict with the given reality."<sup>148</sup> During the climactic scene, Torvald has received a letter exposing Nora's secret. He confronts her; Nora, contemplating suicide, confesses:

NORA: Just let me loose. You're not going to suffer for my sake. You're not going to take on my guilt.  
 HELMER: No more playacting (187).

Nora has, in fact, been playacting the role of wife, mother, lover, parent, and all the requisite assignments of a bourgeois family – but *so has Torvald*. Both Nora and Torvald, writes Toril Moi, "spend most of the play theatricalizing themselves by acting out their own clichéd idealist scripts."<sup>149</sup> When Torvald receives another letter exonerating Nora, he says "I'm saved, Nora, I'm saved." He naturally leaves Nora out of the equation and only incorporates her when she reminds him of her "role." Nora, who has been wearing her evening "costume," changes into street clothes (instead of pajamas) and informs Torvald that she is leaving. Torvald fails to comprehend her actions and this failure is a fault line between pre-modern and modern ideas. Nora points out that the real acting *has been his*, and that she no longer wishes to play a role in his scenario with Torvald as the leading man. Torvald has been "playacting" father, husband, and lover, but his real feelings, like Nora's, are dulled by convention.

NORA: That's the point right there: you've never understood me. I've been wronged greatly, Torvald – first by Papa, and then by you.  
 HELMER: What! By us – the two people who've loved you more than anyone else?  
 NORA: (*shakes her head*). You never loved me. You've thought it fun to be in love with me, that's all (191).

Toril Moi has aptly noted that this conflict between “theatricality and authenticity,” the playacting and the real, “stands at the center of Ibsen’s modernism.”<sup>150</sup> Nora’s dancing the tarantella, a highly theatricalized moment, presents a double layer of concealment; her body in motion is obfuscating her authentic self, her self-awareness of betrayal and her realization that she is living a lie. Her home no longer shelters daydreams; the truth has been illuminated and for Nora there is no turning back.

Nora’s stinging indictment of her “role” means eschewing “motherhood,” too. For Ibsen, there is a correlative between Nora’s emancipation and her abandonment of her children. Freedom will be an uncompromising, modernist motif for Ibsen; even children must be sacrificed to the deity of liberation. Nora’s leaving will, as Una Chaudhuri contends, launch her “into another kind of ideal space altogether, not a home at all.” Her leave-taking will require “something of the quality of a feat, something breathtakingly acrobatic, if not downright magical,” because what she accomplishes is the rejection of personhood in relationship to home (or at least home as defined by a masculine-dominant relation). As Chaudhuri explains, “once the bourgeois-home-as-doll’s-house is deemed unsuitable for the important project of self-actualization, the question of *what kind of place will best nurture and support selfhood* is increasingly featured in the drama.”<sup>151</sup> Nora realizes that she was merely a ritualistic pawn, passed down as she was from her father to her husband, and that she is unworthy of motherhood until she grasps her identity without anyone’s aid. Walking out may be irrational; she has no money or means of subsistence; she is ill prepared for the world outside her husband’s protection. Yet she rejects the rational option of “working her marriage out.” Intuition, too, is invalid, her “maternal instinct” now unacceptable. If modernism means to show that Enlightenment reason on the one hand, and Romantic intuition on the other, are insufficient, Nora is a paradigm of modernism. Arnold Hauser’s description of Ibsen’s social message fits most succinctly with Nora and demarcates the line between modern and pre-modernism: “the duty of the individual towards himself, the task of self-realization, the enforcement of one’s own nature against the narrow-minded, stupid and out-of-date conventions of bourgeois society.”<sup>152</sup> Ibsen attacks headlong the nineteenth-century convention of women as incompetent, emotionally-laden, “feeling” creatures incapable of “action” – the supposed domain of men. Nora’s backstage manipulation of her father’s finances demonstrates unequivocally her capacity for action, her alacrity for strategic calculation, and her rational understanding of multiple consequences. She is as capable of understanding the world and committing to action as any man. Her surface appearance as the “ditz,” tarantella-dancing, macaroon-eating trophy wife veils her comprehension of her social conditions; she is enveloped in the theatrical mask of a role she no longer wishes to play.

At the end she closes the door – literally and symbolically – on a way of life unacceptable to modern feminism.

### *Ghosts*

If *A Doll's House* created a feminist scandal, his next play evoked outrage. *Ghosts* (1881) is rich with dialectical contrasts: debauchery vs altruism; Pastor Manders's morality vs Mrs Alving's; orphanage and sailor's house (whore house); surface reality and deeper truths; duty vs individuality. Like Nora, Mrs Alving lives with an ominous secret caused by her husband. The play is drenched in shadowy images: Act One opens to a "somber landscape and rain" (203); Act Two begins in a "thick mist [that] still veils the landscape" (233); and in Act Three it is "dark outside, only the faint glow of red" (260). The title of the play, *Gengangere*, implies those who return to walk again, suggesting the primitive and the occult. The home is filled with poltergeists: fetid, odorous, and corrupted, despite all the attempts to cover and veil the disease infecting the landscape. Theoharis C. Theoharis writes that the title means "one that returns after death or a long absence,"<sup>153</sup> something that walks again, conveying the sense of purgatory and of someone condemned to reappear. The Darwinian theme shadows the play – physical ailments, hereditary, atavistic diseases.

Ibsen's *Ghosts* exposes familial taboos, the sexual undercurrents of parents and children. The "sins of the father" ("*Fadrenes synder*" 250) are passed down despite the best efforts of Mrs Alving. The relationship hinges on the widowed Mrs Alving and her only son, Osvald, who has returned from his artist's life in Paris to die of syphilis in his mother's sunless country house. Two other main characters are Regine, the family maid, and Pastor Manders, the arbiter of moral righteousness who may or may not have had an affair with Mrs Alving. Ibsen unveils the plot's secrets – Regine's true parentage and Osvald's impending doom – as it impacts on Mrs Alving. She is burdened with the efforts to correct her husband's transgressions and debauchery through her sponsorship of an orphanage, only to see the orphanage burn. She lives hemmed in by her stacks of modern books preaching rebellion against her philistine and reactionary neighbors. The drama's every confession hints at a deeper mystery: the "ghosts" that haunt the characters are not merely the disease of syphilis, but the disease of lies. Ibsen was wrong to assume that syphilis can be passed from father to son, but he takes dramatic license to demonstrate the corruption of the very house the characters inhabit.

MANDERS: (as if stunned into stone). And all that in this house! In this house!

MRS ALVING: I've endured a lot in this house to keep him [her husband] home in the evenings – and nights. (229–230).



Contagion is the play's texture, the notion that a moral stain on one is a moral stain on all. Engstrand, the supposed father of Regine, lusts after his own daughter – and has as his goal pimping her – yet even this obscures the deeper truth: that he is in fact not the father at all. Oswald, the rube prodigal son, desires Regine, even after it is revealed that she is his half-sibling from his father's lusting, immoral behavior. Sam Shephard's tragic love affair in *Fool For Love*, written a century later, is not far removed from Ibsen's moral conundrum. Locked in their Freudian-libidinal embrace, both Mrs Alving and her son Oswald wrestle with desire and reason, passion and restraint, flesh and common sense. As Mrs Alving says,

It's not only what we inherit from our fathers and mothers that keeps on returning to us. It's all kinds of old dead doctrines and opinions and beliefs, that sort of thing. They aren't alive in us, but they hang on all the same, and we can't get rid of them. I just have to pack up a newspaper, and it's as if I could see the ghosts slipping between the lines. They must be haunting the whole country, ghosts everywhere – so many and thick, they're like grains of sand. And there we are, the lot of us, so miserably afraid of the light (238).

The characters are obsessed with the “joy of life” – *livsglede*, meaning life impulses. Like romantic idealists, they long for a transcendent joy beyond the material, but are always brought back down to earth by the bodily needs and shortcomings. Michael Meyers makes the point that in *Ghosts*, like most of his plays, Ibsen attacks “the hollowness of great reputations, provincialism of outlook, the narrow and inhibiting effect of small-town life, the suppression of individual freedom from within as well as from without, and the neglect of the significance of heredity.”<sup>154</sup> As Oswald says, “Mother, have you noticed how everything I've painted is involved with this joy of life? Always and invariably, the joy of life. With light and sun and holiday scenes – and faces radiant with human content. That's why I'm afraid to stay on at home with you” (257). His fears are rooted in desire for Regine, instigated by his Oedipal stimulation from his mother. We are, with Ibsen, amidst light and dark. Arnold Weinstein makes this point when he says that “Ibsen strikes the quintessentially modern note by insisting that it is the light that terrifies us, and it does so because it makes visible the horrible company (the living dead, our own dead selves, vital as ever, coercive still) that we keep.”<sup>155</sup> Throwing “light” on the truth is something we abhor, fearful that its exposure will illuminate our most intimate fears and secrets. As Michael Goldman cautiously remarks, in Ibsen's theatre, “the work of art sees *you*.”<sup>156</sup> It is the audience that will share the spotlight with the actors, as Ibsen exposes *our* shortcomings.

For Ibsen, our shortcomings are our modern tragedy. In *Ghosts*, he examines the modern tragedy as it relates to ancient tragedy, where in both fate is uncompromising and inescapable. Like Oedipus, Oswald seeks to uncover lies

and deceptions, only to find in his struggles against them, as Raymond Williams observes, “that as a man he belongs to this world, and has its destructive inheritance in himself. Ibsen turned this way and that, looking for a way out of this tragic deadlock, but normally he returns to it, and confesses its terrible power.”<sup>157</sup> Oswald’s mother puts it this way to Pastor Manders: “Ghosts. When I heard Regina and Oswald in there, it was as if I was seeing ghosts. But I almost believe we *are* ghosts, all of us, Pastor.”

The light symbolizes the reflection of truth, a willingness to free ourselves from the past, which is the benchmark of modernism. But as Ibsen demonstrates, this urge for freedom is an uneasy aspiration, and our failure to attain it marks our place in modern tragedy. For the next eighty years, playwrights will pick up on Ibsen’s notion of light and freedom and how modern characters broker their efforts to obtain it with tragic consequences.

### *The Wild Duck, Rosmersholm,* and the Age of the World Picture

In “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” Martin Jay contends that the modern era has been “dominated by the sense of sight in a way that set it apart from its premodern predecessors and possibly its postmodern successor. Beginning with the Renaissance and the scientific revolution, modernity has been normally considered resolutely ocularcentric.”<sup>158</sup> In Ibsen’s *The Wild Duck*, the concept of visualization and spatialization come together in a clash between idealism and pragmatism, surface truths and illusions, and what is seen and what is obscured. Two elder patriarchs who were once business partners are Old Ekdal, ruined, and the other still prosperous, Haakon Werle. The financial indiscretion estranged both men, but not their sons, Hjalmar Ekdal and Gregers Werle (this theme will influence Arthur Miller’s *All My Sons*). Each is dealing with sins of their fathers in different ways. Hjalmar runs a photography studio but actually devotes his time to imaginative “inventions” that he hopes will remove the family blemish. He is a dreamer, detached from the daily grind of life. Most of his time is spent absurdly hunting rabbits in his loft with his father. Old Ekdal served prison time for corruption and now lives in a dream world, too. Gregers, who could have inherited the family fortune, chooses instead to devote his monastic life to “truth.” One character lives in illusions, the other seeks to destroy them. Hjalmar is fortunate in that he is married to Gina; she works in the photography studio keeping the family financially afloat. Hjalmar adores his daughter, Hedvig, but in reality she is the child of Haakon. Unbeknownst to Hjalmar, Haakon, out of guilt, supplies the family with supplemental money for support. Hedvig, who is threatened with

hereditary blindness, also inherits her supposed father's idealism: she adores him, her grandfather, and the literal and symbolic wounded wild duck that she nestles in their loft. Gregers is bound and determined to show Hjalmar the truth: that his daughter is not really his. A retired doctor and drunk, Relling, provides the cynical wisdom that Hjalmar needs his "life-lies" to live because, like all of us, these lies serve a therapeutic balm soothing life's harsh disappointments. In contrast, Gregers practices a narrow-minded and Procrustean idealism that infects the tranquil domesticity, even if the family is living on charity and delusion. The fatal gunshot heard in *The Wild Duck* is typical of melodramatic convention, but Ibsen subverts this in order to convey something more symbolic and subterranean than the surface melodramas of his contemporaries.

Gregers, the righteous moral son of Haakon Werle, is similar to Pastor Manders, but his mission seems even more idealistic and obsessive. His truth-seeking is a messianic call to the Platonic ideal – "truth" and essences no matter what the cost – and introduces a discordant note into the peaceful and loving family of his friend Hjalmar. Gregers attempts to uncover the infidelity and expose the family to the "truth" – a truth that is only factual, not far-reaching. Hjalmar's father, Old Ekdal, sequesters himself in the attic-loft of the home, along with the wild duck. His offspring is an inventor of sorts, a feckless, immature man unaware of life's complexities. Shaw sums up the dynamic of Gregers's invasion of Hjalmar's household when he says "Into this domestic circle there comes a new lodger, an idealist of the most advanced type. He greedily swallows the daimonic theory of the clergyman's drunkenness, and enthusiastically accepts the photographer as the high-souled hero he supposes himself to be; but he is troubled because the relations of man and his wife do not constitute an ideal marriage."<sup>159</sup> The lies that have sustained Hjalmar are ripped open by Gregers; his daughter, whom he loves, is not his daughter at all. Gregers's toxic idealism infects not only Ekdal, but Gina; her suicide is promoted by Gregers's sanctimoniousness.

Vision is everywhere in the play, and the oncoming blindness of Hedvig or the backdrop of Hjalmar's wife's photography are merely some of many symbols alluding to sight. Old Werle should avoid staring at the light because it is bad for his eyes (400); "Gregers: I've seen you at too close quarters. Werle: You've seen me with your mother's eyes. (*Dropping his voice*). But you should remember that those eyes were – clouded at times" (409). Hjalmar, Ekdal, and Gina repeat the phrase "smack between the eyes [*øjnene*]" (416). Act Three opens in Hjalmar's studio, with "daylight" streaming "*through the large windows in the sloping roof*." Hjalmar is at his table, "*busy retouching a photograph; many other pictures lie in front of him*" (431). The dialogue is thick with vision: look, see, view, gaze, observe; lampshades are removed to get

more natural “light”; and Gregers self-righteously says “I’m planning to open Hjalmar Ekdal’s eyes. He’s going to see his situation just as it is – that’s all” (449). When Hjalmar finally understands that his daughter is not his, he exclaims: “Don’t come near me, Hedvig! Keep away. I can’t bear seeing you. Oh, the eyes!” (469).

The specter of ocularcentrism is not exclusively modern. When Lear banishes his friend Kent because Kent warns Lear of a too-hasty judgment in dividing his land and ostracizing Cordelia, Lear cries “Out of my sight, Kent,” to which Kent replies, “See better, Lear.” The metaphor is poetic and obvious; we must look more closely at our actions and their consequences. But in the modern era, seeing has become more complicated. Ibsen himself remarks: “What, then, does it mean to write [*at digte*]. It was a long time before I realized that to write is essentially to see; but, it should be noted, to see in such a way that what is seen comes into the possession of the beholder as the poet saw it.”<sup>160</sup> Technology has complicated the certainty of vision; it is not enough to see into people – we must use photographs and imagery to try to recreate the core of human consciousness. We see and re-see through technology, reflecting on images in ways impossible and unimaginable in the pre-modern era. We can now bend images, change meaning, refocus arrangements, and most significantly, restructure our own past to bolster the meaning of the present. Michael Goldman asserts that “As the speech of old Werle’s suggests, ‘making the picture come out right’ is not only a matter of hypocrisy or convenient self-deception. It rises from the cloudiest springs of human disposition, from our most crippling needs and passions. ‘Seeing’ as a determinative activity, as a crucial component of agency, is subtextual – buried and alienated in its origins, doing its fatal work in secret.” In the play, Goldman adds, a child is at the center “because the adult efforts at retouching that shape its action are all linked to the volatile and distorted psychic life we bring with us from childhood.”<sup>161</sup> The mystical, man-made garret, consistently changing because of the light, is an attempt to recreate a forest environment for the wounded duck, but it also symbolizes the visual tranquility and pre-modern idyllic state before the industrial revolution and before the rise of technology. In the garret are the souls of an innocent child and doddering grandfather, an unsullied, pre-modern past, yet also the locale of the hunter and the hunted.

The ending of *Ghosts* might seem a trajectory towards tragic illumination; like Oedipus, Mrs Alving presses towards the truth of her past even if its revelations are devastating. In *The Wild Duck*, however, it is unclear whether anything has been discovered or revealed; a child is destroyed, yet the insights are no more illuminating than at the beginning. Hedvig has committed suicide owing to her father’s rejection. It would appear at first that “the grief of death,” in Relling’s words, “will bring out greatness in almost everyone. But how long

do you think this glory will last with *him* [Hjalmar]?” (489). Gregers is appalled, certain that the profundity of the truth will “shed light” for Hjalmar. But Relling’s realism comes down on Gregers’s idealism like a sledgehammer:

- RELLING: In less than a year little Hedvig will be nothing more to him than a pretty theme for recitation.
- GREGERS: You dare say that about Hjalmar Ekdal!
- RELLING: We’ll be lecturing on this when the first grass shows on her grave. Then you can hear him spewing out phrases about “the child torn too soon from her father’s heart,” and you’ll have your chance to watch him souse himself in conceit and self-pity. Wait and see.
- GREGERS: If you’re right, and I’m wrong, then life isn’t worth living.
- RELLING: Oh, life would be good in spite of all, if we only could have some peace from those damned shysters who come badgering poor people with their “summons to the ideal.”
- GREGERS: (*starting straight ahead*) In that case, I’m glad my destiny is what it is.
- RELLING: Beg pardon – but what is your destiny?
- GREGERS: (*about to leave*) To be the thirteenth man at the table.
- RELLING: Oh, go to hell (490).

Relling’s final remark undercuts the melodrama, diminishes Gregers’s lofty idealism, and turns tragedy into farce. Gregers, like Dr Stockmann in the previous play *An Enemy of the People*, is correct yet sanctimonious; Stockmann is right about the baths, but his demeanor leaves no wiggle room. Stockmann and Gregers play a zero-sum game which, as Relling says, badgers unfortunate dreamers with their “summons to the ideal.” Gregers’s “thirteenth man at the table” is a celebration of his outsider status; but Ibsen exposes these self-righteous outsiders as insufferable. Romantic idealism has virtue as long as it’s not shoved down other people’s throats.

Yet the play’s complexity does not entirely shut out idealism. Child-like imagination is at the root of Ibsen’s challenge to the human conflict between our dream-aspirations and the dull obstacles of reality. Gregers has deprived Hjalmar of the life-lie, *livsløgnen*, that sustains people from childhood into adulthood. Likewise Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, the barflies in O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh*, Uncle Vanya’s awakening to the truth of his brother-in-law, or Beckett’s eternal waiting for something that will never come, the life-lie is born from romanticism’s dream of transcendence ambushed and mauled by modernism’s crushing truths. Hjalmar has a different ideal than Gregers; his is defined by a simple (not simplistic) love of family. The play suggests that all the characters are, to borrow Goldman’s observation above, trying to adjust the picture of the modern world. Everyone is trying to adjust reality, tweak it, like retouching a photograph. Gina will retouch the

photograph for the offstage patrons; her job is to fix the reality seen in the picture. Gregers accuses his father of creating a false picture of their relationship; and he, too, finds in his life's mission the desire to make Hjalmar's family picture come out right.

In "The Age of the World Picture," Martin Heidegger writes that the modern age is the very notion of a "world picture." There was a time before, when people did not refer to a "picture" of the world; but after photography, we have not only a new age in contrast with the past, "but it settles itself firmly in place expressly as the new. To be new is peculiar to the world that has become picture."<sup>162</sup> *The Wild Duck* is filled with repairing, cleaning, tidying, and picking up other people's mess; in other words, retouching the picture. It begins immediately with the servants straightening up the den; Gina and Hedvig are cleaning up their studio and guest room for Gregers; and the loft is made clean for the fragile duck. Perhaps the most poignant and absurd moment is when Hedvig is carried in dead. Hjalmar keeps saying that she is not dead, she is coming alive, it is barely a wound. To borrow a useful cliché, there is "something wrong with this picture" and Hjalmar is going to fix it. Moreover, characters are frequently drunk or suffering from hangovers; people are continually clearing the cobwebs so they can see straight. And the stage itself is a picture, a proscenium frame; no one in the play actually takes a picture – we never see the actual photography happening – but rather, it is what the audience sees.

It is not a question of what is being seen in the picture, so much as what is behind the seeing – what is behind the eyes. What is there, I submit, are childhoods that inform our sight. Ibsen is moving in the direction of modern Freudian analysis, suggesting that we see through the distorted vision of our childhood, or how our childhood has influenced the way we organize our perceptions. We are reminded in the play of the past childhood circumstances, a subtext that informs the present. The ever changing set – this play is, along with *John Gabriel Borkman*, one of Ibsen's most radically designed theatrical settings – provides half visions, partial openings, fragmented views. The doors to the attic are thrown open, but the garret where the duck is housed is half in view, half out of sight. The stage keeps changing its appearance, and we never see the duck fully. Things in our sightlines are only half in view; the set teases the audience, we're compelled to look in, even when we should be paying attention to the actors. The times of day keep changing in each Act, too. The play's metaphor is childhood memory, trying to get the picture right, trying to fill the void, because memory blurs, it selects out that which it wishes to see, and like a dream, some things make sense, some things don't. "The fundamental event of the modern age," writes Heidegger, "is the conquest of the world as picture. The word 'picture' [*Bild*] now

means the structuring image [*Gebild*] that is the creature of man's producing which represents and set before."<sup>163</sup>

But all that is presented in *The Wild Duck* is illusory, destabilized and not so much unfocused as out-of-focus and in need of constant retouching. The loft is a pathetic illusion; Old Ekdal goes there to hunt, wearing his wizened military uniform. The duck is kept alive pathetically; there are rabbits in this urban attic, cackling chickens, cooing doves; it is meant to be funny in an almost embarrassing way. The backdrop of sounds intrudes into the play, undercutting the serious melodrama like a wiseacre student in the back of a classroom. Martin Puchner observes that "Of all of Ibsen's plays, *The Wild Duck* is the one that revolves most explicitly around the process by which a simple device or stage prop becomes an objective correlative, something that gathers a whole range of meanings." The play's title names the symbol, "but the play cannot decide what it signifies." The very ambiguity of the "wild duck" suggests the blurriness of the play, creating a tension between visual certainly and uncertainty that leads to what Puchner calls "the heart of modernism."<sup>164</sup> The vagary is deliberate, I contend, because Ibsen emphasizes the miasma we experience with memory, how we see (or try to see) and how the visions we observe – whether actual or memory – fail to add up to a coherent, air-tight explanation of life. In contrast to melodrama, with its moral certainty and neat disclosure and closure, Ibsen obfuscates the ethical edges and makes us doubt the certainty of what we see.

At center stage is Hjalmar – toying with things like a child. It is Hjalmar who is the child – Gina and Hedvig are the adults. Gina is seen darning, knitting, working, retouching, talking to clients, cooking, cleaning, and assuming all the breadwinner's responsibilities. Hjalmar's bond with his family, however marooned on a false island, gives him dignity and pathos. Not tragedy in the Greek sense, enriched by lofty angst. Instead, it is tragic because Hjalmar's tranquility is childlike; his naïveté is pristine; and his magical inquisitiveness (his inventions) are charming tinker-toys. Hedvig returns his love not because he is her biological father (he isn't), but because he retains the innocent purity of childhood that she can identify. Hedvig is at the transitional age from childhood to adulthood, the tipping point of a frightful time. She is entering an age of responsibility and sexuality, testing the world and then returning to the safety of the nest (she is told to go for walks by herself yet the parents fear for her safety).

We need to keep in mind that almost all of the characters have been abused in the past. Even Gregers's new step-mother Mrs. Sorby has previously lived with an abusive husband. Ibsen's familial difficulties are a palimpsest on this play. Hedvig is the name of Ibsen's sister, and perhaps the only member of his family with whom he remained in close contact. Hedvig is given many of the

details of his own childhood – the child who escapes into a fantasy world into which Ibsen himself withdrew. In the play she reads the books Ibsen read as a child. Likewise the character we might most closely associate with Ibsen, Gregers, the righteous reformer, is bitter. Gregers punishes his self-absorbed father; Ibsen never lost the feelings of shame and humiliation at his own father's financial ruin. The space of the play suggests religious iconography, but as with the duck, it only suggests and never quantifies. The attic can be seen as a shrine, an unsullied place reserved for solace, a pristine symbol of Jesus in the manger. The seating arrangement at the opening dinner party refers to the Christian mythos of thirteen during the Last Supper, but there is also the Norse mythology that refers to a banquet held at Valhalla, in which twelve Gods were invited, and Loki, the god of strife, chaos, and deceit, arrived and killed Balder, the God of light and beauty. The pagan and Christian worlds intersect, and more so in the next play.

On the surface *Rosmersholm* is the story of a self-defrocked Rosmer, descendent from a long line of community and moral leaders, who lives in a Platonic relationship with a beautiful libertine, Rebecca West. The once conservative Rosmer has abandoned his prior political beliefs in favor of progressive ideals; by contrast, his brother-in-law Dr Kroll seeks his support for conservative causes. Rosmer is also recently widowed, his wife committing suicide because she could not bear him a child and because she was jealous of the household's new arrival. Rebecca is, according to Per Schelde Jacobsen and Barbara Fass Leavy, "from the northernmost part of Norway, from 'Finnmarken,'" whose people "were the epitome of demonic beings who had mysterious powers." Rebecca is "a demon, a mermaid, a representative of the raw *Volksseele* without cultural varnish." As a spirit of a demon-pagan Viking, Ibsen strands her "on a foreign planet and in a culture that has no defense against her."<sup>165</sup> Like Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* or *Anthony and Cleopatra*, the sexual tension between Rosmer and Rebecca is palpable and fraught with dark, foreboding "ghosts." Again, the home takes center stage, with its bourgeois parlor, claustrophobic aura, and stifling accoutrement. The love story is framed around dreamers living a nightmare and the lines of moral certainly are beginning to dissolve in Ibsen's dramaturgy. Like *The Wild Duck*, the haziness emerges like a thick cloud, rendering greater complexity and ambivalence.

Rosmer is a romantic whose idealism is challenged by Rebecca's "new woman." Like the committed idealist Gregers, Rosmer digs his heels in; however, he lacks Gregers's passionate stubbornness. Rosmer wavers; his personal, inward doubt and hesitancy form his disconnected moral vision, caving in at times to his conservative brother-in-law. Thomas F. Van Laan maintains that "Rosmer's assumption that he can get to the bottom of things, achieve clarity, is highly ironic, since, more than any other Ibsen play,



*Rosmersholm* has no bottom and therefore no ultimate clarity.” This is because “the kind of bottom Rosmer assumes to exist” is “not given precise definition.”<sup>166</sup> Rosmer gropes, lunges, reaches, and stumbles after any semblance of “truth,” sadly but bravely unaware that, like the mysterious Rebecca, the “bottom” of things is endless. Rebecca, like many of Ibsen’s characters, is tormented with guilt, not only over the death of Rosmer’s former wife, Bertha, but also by her sexual relationship with her father. She cannot find an outlet for her pain; when Rosmer finally agrees to marry her, she reneges, balking at her own desires out of a conflict between sexuality and morality. The white horses of Rosmer’s home symbolize the menacing, punishing fate that plagues these dangerous idealists. Freud saw the play as a model of repressed desire: “a girl who enters a household as servant, companion, or governess, will consciously or unconsciously weave a day-dream, which derives from the Oedipal complex, of the mistress of the house disappearing and the master taking the newcomer as his wife in her place.”<sup>167</sup> “The Rosmer way of life ennobles,” Rebecca says, “But it kills happiness” (575). Happiness – *lykken* – is at the root of their desires. But the space kills it. “That’s the awful part of it, John,” she pleads, “I’ve changed, so that my own past seals me off from [life].” (576).

*Rosmersholm* means Rosmer’s islet, or little island. Rebecca is his soulmate because she, too, is sealed off from the world, marooned on an island where she cannot escape from her haunted memories. Ibsen again builds on atmosphere and space, but here space contains the intense sexual desires of Rosmer and Rebecca. Their very touch burns their flesh and stirs their guilt simultaneously. The orchestration of this sexual encounter is finely balanced between forward and backward movements; like a great dance team, the movement of Rosmer and Rebecca is a perfect alchemy of attraction and repulsion. The eroticism will carry over into Ibsen’s next work, *Lady from the Sea*, but it is burned to corruption by the time he writes his most profound play, *Hedda Gabler*.

### *Hedda Gabler*

*Hedda Gabler* (1891) received the worst critical notices of any of Ibsen’s mature plays. Critics complained that it was obtuse, morbid, cruel, and its protagonist un-redeeming and inscrutable. Its world premiere in Germany at the Residenztheater in Munich on January 31 was roundly condemned; it opened at the Lessingtheater in Berlin two days later and the reception was hardly better. As Michael Meyer notes, “Even critics normally friendly towards him found the play illogical.”<sup>168</sup> Yet, despite the poor initial reception, *Hedda Gabler* is the most universally admired of Ibsen’s plays and one of the most

frequently performed. For actresses it is equivalent to playing Hamlet. So why did it baffle his contemporaries, who quickly dismissed it as an aberration?

One problem with the play, for its earliest critics, was its dialogue. There were no long speeches or explanatory monologues; the language is Ibsen's most economically terse. The text's *stichomythia* – Greek term for rapid-fire dialogue – is taken for granted today, but during its time fragmentary dialogue was rare and revolutionary. Edmund Grosse, one of the few critics to recognize Ibsen's dialogue and an enthusiastic supporter, wrote in 1891 that "The stichomythia of the Greek and French tragedians was lengthy in comparison with this [*Hedda Gabler's*] unceasing display of hissing conversational fireworks, fragments of sentences without verbs, clauses that come to nothing, adverbial exclamations and cryptic interrogations." He noticed that it would add "to the lucidity of the play if some one character were permitted occasionally to express himself at moderate length, as Nora does in *A Doll's House*, and Mrs Alving in *Ghosts*." However, he concludes, "onstage, no doubt, this broken utterance will give an extraordinary sense of reality."<sup>169</sup> It will also give the play an extraordinary sense of power by way of its elusiveness and opacity.

Hedda Gabler, daughter of a general, marries a college professor, finds that her former lover threatens her husband's chances for tenure at the University, becomes ensnared in the machinations of Judge Brack, who seeks to make her his paramour, and in the end takes her life. The play occurs within twenty-four hours, in one setting, like a good neoclassical drama – one time, place, and action. Ibsen's protagonist seeks an ideal world and self-sufficiency, but falls short in both endeavors. Each action she undertakes, which is meant to bring her closer to her ideals and her autonomy, actually sets in motion a reversal. She is an aristocrat among petty bourgeoisie; Ibsen, likely writing a doppelgänger response to Strindberg's earlier play *Miss Julie* (Strindberg caught on to this instantly, proffering the snarky remark that "You can see now that my seed has actually fallen into Ibsen's brain-pan – and grown!"),<sup>170</sup> writes of an aristocracy on the decline. Moreover, Hedda has no identity outside of her "relations," no center, no "I" to call her own, nothing but a reflection of images by others – trophy wife, general's daughter, bitch goddess, femme fatale, and "sodomasochistic, manipulative, murderous, and suicidal," to quote Harold Bloom<sup>171</sup> – that is at odds with herself. She refuses to be Brack's or Lovborg's mistress, or part of Tesman's warm-and-fuzzy life with his Aunts. She resists Tesman's pedantry, with its world of sycophantics currying favor in academic politics. "Hedda's resistance to the female role of muse and mother," writes Gail Finney, "is characteristic of her consistent rebellion against the conventional turn-of-the-century view of women's place."<sup>172</sup> Her sense of self is sundered through the conflict between thought and being, concept and sense. Ibsen, J. W. Burrow writes, "uses women to explore questions of will and self; convention weighed

so heavily on women that it seemed self-evident that they could achieve personal freedom only in defiance, while marriage could plausibly figure as the residual form of slavery.”<sup>173</sup> Refusing to live imprisoned by convention – though she fears any act of non-conformity – she is a person lacking an outlet. Her pent-up frustrations curdle like sour milk, making her mean-spirited and aloof. Yet if she were little more than a bitch goddess, the play would hardly endure. There is something deeper in Hedda Gabler that has attracted actresses and productions for over a century.

There are symbols, staging, and conceptual worldviews that inform the play. Symbols point to Medusa’s head; hair, head, and temple are intertwined. Hedda remembers Thea by her irritating hair; in grade school Hedda always pulled at Thea’s coif. Hedda’s favorite and tenebrous allegory “vine leaves in his hair” runs throughout the play. She urges Lovborg to shoot himself in the temple – the *tindingen*, which also means the summit. Lovborg goes to the whore house of Diana, “the red-headed temptress.” The antithesis is the body and pregnancy. Like a Cartesian split, the body and mind are conflictual reference points for Hedda throughout the play; she wants to live in the mind but her world keeps her imprisoned in her body – as sexual object and parturiency. Spatially, Hedda also never leaves the stage; other characters move about freely, coming and going, but once Hedda enters she never exits. She is literally trapped onstage, what Joan Templeton calls “the last two days of a cornered woman’s increasingly futile effort to live a life she despises and her consequent decision to end it.”<sup>174</sup> The conflict lies in the gulf between Hedda’s aesthetic worldview and everyone else’s material view. The play can be summarily expressed along several conflicts, the first being between Hedda the aesthetic idealist on the one hand, and the pragmatists who emerge around her on the other. There is the abyss within Hedda herself, between Hedda the truth seeker who aspires to know things for their own sake and Hedda the idealist seeking knowledge beyond human capacity. But she must sacrifice these dreams for her husband; her life with Tesman is embedded in his goal to receive tenure. He borrows money to pay for their new home based on his belief that tenure is imminent; now that Hedda’s former suitor is sober and back in the spotlight, Tesman’s dream is threatened – Lovborg, not Tesman, might be offered the University appointment. Tesman is no match for Lovborg: he is preoccupied with completing his dissertation, the study of domestic handicrafts in Brabant during the Middle Ages, while Lovborg is an imaginative thinker, writing a book on the history “of the future.” Ibsen cannot help but poke fun of academia; he even goes so far as to have Tesman conduct his research during his honeymoon with Hedda. Hedda bemoans the fact that she is condemned to “Hear nothing but the history of civilization, morning, noon, and night!” Her frustrations are sexual, social, and existential; but they are exacerbated by the threat of Lovborg, who has written a groundbreaking

manuscript. Lovborg, living in the clear air outside the academy, lays the ground for an idea of a future, a book proactive rather than reactive.

The male characters, in particular, use their professional careers – history, teaching, and law – to formulate their identity and reality. But Hedda does not have their resources or self history, what Ibsen himself has called Hedda’s desperate conviction “that life must offer so many possibilities of happiness, but that she can’t catch sight of them. It is the want of a goal in life that torments her.”<sup>175</sup> This does not mean that she has lost desire in itself, only that her desire lacks a tangible outlet. There is no “place” for her to assert identity professionally, socially, or creatively. Hedda desires beauty and aesthetics in life; against this backdrop are the other characters who desire practical things. Michael Goldman refers to Hedda’s “vine leaves” as her “last-ditch sensual invention.”<sup>176</sup> Each time Hedda uses the allegorical “with vine leaves in his hair” (*med vinlov i håret*) she does so in different dialogic circumstances; and each principal character responds differently. “Vine leaves” frequently tell us as much about the other characters as it does about Hedda. It is worth noting that Hedda’s first reference to leaves is in Act One, and although it is not “vine leaves,” it carries significance. Hedda enters and is drawn immediately into the world of the bourgeois Tesman and Aunt Julie. Julie is trying to get closer to Hedda, symbolizing her desire to engulf Hedda in her cozy and treacle world. Julie exits, insulted that Hedda has mistaken her hat for the maid’s, and Hedda and Tesman are left alone on stage for the first time.

- HEDDA: (*again calm and controlled*). I’m just looking at the leaves – they’re so yellow – and so withered.  
 TESMAN: (*Wraps up the slippers and puts them on the table*) Yes, well, we’re into September now.  
 HEDDA: (*once more restless*) Yes, to think – that already we’re in – in September (705).

This exchange reveals the way in which each character relates to “leaves.” Hedda’s poetic vision of color and texture contrasts with Tesman’s blunt lack of imagination. Hedda’s observation moves us from a perceived reality (leaves) to the inner condition (yellowed and weathered). Tesman views this superficially; he attends to his slippers, concluding that there is nothing more to “see” other than a sign of the changing seasons. For Tesman, there is no perception of color and texture, only what color means in its sequential patterns. There is no meaningful aesthetic observation or even the possibility of transcending the superficial. His slippers – his past – are his inescapable identity. Hedda’s “restless” vision is drawn to events beneath the surface.

Mervyn Nicholson maintains that it is the “brilliant aristocrat Hedda” who “perishes – whereas the bourgeois Tesman survives, and thrives.” As Nicholson

asserts, for “someone so stupid, he [Tesman] gets surprisingly pretty much everything he wants: the right job, the right woman, even the right task: putting other people’s papers in order.”<sup>177</sup> Tesman may not be as “stupid” as he is often portrayed; he is, after all, aware of the burned manuscript and plays along with Hedda’s scheme. Still, he does not possess the same creativity for calculation as Hedda, and he certainly does not have her aesthetic vision. For Hedda, the surface reality is “appalling and ugly,” as Errol Durbach suggests,<sup>178</sup> something which obscures the underlying meaning of things, a meaning Hedda relentlessly pursues. She establishes an alternative value system in relationship to the object in question, leaves, presenting an unbridgeable gulf between herself and others. For Hedda, awareness of color and texture underscores her sensibility to nature and the poetic. She has, in the words of Gérard Genette, imposed an “aspectual” template on things, a type of attention “necessary to establish an aesthetic relation.”<sup>179</sup> Hers is not a cognitive observation, but rather an appreciation for the artistry in the spatial arrangement. Her aesthetics presupposes a super-sensory realm that grounds empirical reality into the imagination. Yet in her bourgeois environment, her aesthetic perceptions are not merely unappreciated, they are deemed irrelevant. Tesman and others, embedded in bourgeois reality, mute her perceptions by their linguistic dominance. She gains brief satisfaction in ruining Lovborg, but even then she cannot enjoy the results of his demise. He shoots himself in the groin, not beautifully as she wishes; and she now finds the manuscript reconstructed by Thea (Tesman’s former lover) and Tesman.

Hedda’s vision of the leaves is spoken in a void, with no one there to appreciate it. Aesthetics furnish a substitute for logical expression, animating the mind by opening it out to limitless vistas. Aesthetic discourse therefore differs from logical discourse in basic purpose. Logical discourse teaches, even uplifts; but aesthetic discourse simulates our inner life by producing unexpected associations and feelings. Hedda seeks the aesthetic and the play can be said to be about her struggle to break free from the prison-house of language and into a reality that she can never truly know. Freedom for Hedda cannot be had in the phenomenal world, where causality is sovereign. Only in the world beneath appearances can she escape the rule of cause and effect, with its restrictive ordering and limited options. Her desire to know is the result of her desire to escape the phenomenal world into a world of hyperactive imagination. While this desire can often make her appear edgy and mean, it also attests to her tenacity.

The trope of vine leaves is a sensual appeal for Hedda and therefore complements her cravings for knowledge at a deeper level. Ibsen leaves open to interpretation what Hedda means by vine leaves. This ambiguity is perfectly layered into the play, since vine leaves conceal the things themselves, things beyond knowledge. Since Hedda cannot really know things-in-themselves,

she must find a proxy in “vine leaves.” At the opening of Act Three, Thea and Hedda have already waited in vain through the early morning hours for the return of the men from Brack’s party. Hedda assures the worried Thea that Lovborg and the rest were probably sleeping over at Judge Brack’s. Referring to Lovborg’s manuscript, Hedda says, “And Eilert Lovborg – he’s sitting with vine leaves in his hair.” Thea, like everyone else, is clueless to Hedda’s inference, accepting the opacity as characteristic of Hedda’s enigmatic “charm.” But the meaning goes much deeper.

In Hedda’s view, the men who surround her are what Peter Gay describes as “the obedient, passive, supremely uncreative bourgeois as a ‘herd animal’ who had been to the university and occupied positions of leadership in the academy, business, and government.”<sup>180</sup> Hedda, appearing on the surface to be the conformist, is actually the rebel against these men and her rebelliousness is manifested in her resistance to the female roles of wife, mistress, and mother. Brack teases her about her new role, inviting her to be his potential mistress in what he calls a “triangular relationship,” but she refuses. Hedda hears the news from Brack that Lovborg created a drunken scene the night before and failed to kill himself according to Hedda’s request – by shooting himself in the head. Hedda, “*gazing straight ahead*,” says, “So that’s how it went. Then he had no vine leaves in his hair?” Brack replies: “Vine leaves, Mrs Hedda?” Brack’s agenda, like that of Tesman, eschews aesthetics, seeking only to satiate sexual desire. To some degree Lovborg understands the term “vine leaves,” as when he says at the end of Act Three, “With vine leaves in my hair, as you formerly used to dream.” Hedda cuts him off as there are no words to describe her former days; she speaks, but evasively, saying: “I don’t believe in vine leaves anymore” (762). This is not entirely true; she continues on her quest for “vine leaves” through the next Act, only to find anything but beauty in Lovborg’s death. In the end, as Hedda is pushed into an alcove – her inner sanctum behind the curtain – she promises that “from now on I’ll be quiet” (777). This is, of course, the expression of her silence. Charles Lyons calls this Hedda’s language of circumlocution, because “Ibsen’s text disallows its female protagonist the possibility of self-formation in language.”<sup>181</sup> Her death leaves us with the unspoken – words have failed her.

It is Thea, not Hedda, who makes the most of her life vicariously through men. Realizing that women are shut out from self-fulfillment in public life, Thea hitches her wagon to her first husband; then abandon’s him to Lovborg; and when he dies, hastily turns to Tesman. She is a pragmatist, already hedging her bets by holding onto the manuscript notes of Lovborg’s book, because she has little faith in Lovborg’s capacity to recover from debauchery. She knows him for what he is: brilliant but unstable, capable of achieving genius (like a good romantic) and crashing just as quickly (also like a romantic). Lovborg burns the candle at both ends, but Thea keeps her eyes fixed firmly on her

goal. Hedda, like Nora in *A Doll's House*, has been held up as an exemplary feminist character. There is no doubt that Nora and Hedda experience bigotry, and that Ibsen, Joan Templeton contends, "was not only interested in women's rights, but engaged in the battle."<sup>182</sup> Yet in *Hedda Gabler* the real feminist is Thea: she abandons her comfortable household (much like Nora) to pursue Lovborg and his projects; it is she who recreates his manuscript from notes and, more importantly, from memory. It can be inferred that Thea wrote most, if not all of Lovborg's book, "The History of the Future." We know that she took his dictation, kept notes, and is able to hit the ground running in recreating the manuscript from memory. Many critics consign Thea as a mere sieve, a vessel in which Lovborg pours his ideas down; but are her skills merely secretarial? Or would it be more interesting if her abilities were in co-authoring the book with Lovborg, perhaps even writing the bulk of it? Ibsen does not write one-dimensional figures; his characters are complex and smart, and Thea, no less than Hedda, is as smart and educated as any man. She, not Lovborg, is the symbol of the future; and she, not Hedda, is the feminist who understands that in her world she must live through the achievements of men in order to obtain self-satisfaction. She leaps at the chance to re-construct the book with another man whose professional connections will assure its publication. Hedda burns the manuscript because she sees it as a joint venture between Thea and Lovborg; it is their "child," a creative outlet that evokes jealousy. Thea is able to circumvent the manuscript's destruction; once free of Lovborg, Thea hardly wastes a minute grieving over his death. Harold Clurman maintains that "the play's one flaw" is Thea's "quick recovery from her grief on hearing of Lovborg's sudden death and Tesman's immediate notion of redoing Lovborg's 'lost' book with the notes which Mrs Elvsted carries around with her and their setting about then and there to do so are too pat for credibility."<sup>183</sup> Clurman misses the point that Thea immediately suggests to Tesman that they, together, restore it because she very likely wrote it. And Tesman, ever the un-imaginative but keenly opportunistic and diligent scholar, jumps at the chance to hitch his success to Lovborg's (and Thea's) genius. Thea, then, is the feminist and Hedda the enigma. When Thea responds to another of Hedda's typical off-the-wall remarks with "Oh, Hedda, you say these things, while you yourself don't really believe in them," her pragmatism rejects Hedda's over-the-top romantic vision.

Henry James spoke about the opacity that is Hedda Gabler. "Her motives are just her passions," he says; "What the four acts show us is these motives and that character – complicated, strange, irreconcilable, infernal – playing themselves out. We know too little why she married Tesman, we see too little why she ruins Lovborg; but we recognize that she is infinitely perverse, and Heaven knows that, as the drama mostly goes, the crevices we are called upon to stop are singularly few."<sup>184</sup> We do know something about her motives; Ibsen says as much when he notes that she fears becoming an "old maid." Reared in

the traditional Spartan fashion of a military offspring and member of her aristocratic social class, she cannot go through life as a single woman. Her ruination of Lovborg's manuscript is clear, too – it is done in order to kill the creative “child” born from Thea and Lovborg, and thinking of practicalities, to stop him from overtaking her husband. Lovborg says he won't challenge Tesman, but his unstable behavior is prone to change and he may be persuaded to take the post anyway. Hedda may find Tesman unattractive and his *gemütliche* life repulsive, but she has hitched her wagon to his success and anything standing in the way needs to be terminated. But James is correct in acknowledging what has troubled directors, actresses, and critics over the past century and more: what are her deepest motives? How can a covetous, narrow-minded woman, incapable of love, who feels disconnected to everyone, an admitted coward, terminally bored, and fearful of scandal, fascinate us as she succumbs to one venal impulse after another? Even Tolstoy's Anna Karenina and Flaubert's Madame Bovary, Hedda's nineteenth-century soul-mates, leap into infidelity. What is it, then, that compels audiences to watch her slide into doom? Her motives are, I submit, about a modernist trajectory in which she cannot and will not participate.

### **How German is Hedda Gabler? And how Jewish are her suitors?**

Norman Rhodes observed that “German culture was a major ingredient in Ibsen's intellectual development, and in turn German models and strategies were encoded with their own sense of the ideological superiority and aesthetic efficacy of the Greeks. Ibsen considered himself to be a member of the community of Germanic people; his knowledge of German culture was quite extensive.”<sup>185</sup> Ibsen understood German fluently, lived in Munich and Dresden for much of the 1880s (though traveled throughout Europe frequently), absorbed the culture and history of Germany, was a keen observer of its people, and *Hedda Gabler's* first two performances in early 1891 were in German. Rhodes says that “In Munich, Ibsen felt he would be able ‘to get closer contact again with German literary life,’” yielding “intrinsic connections with the ideals of ancient Greece.”<sup>186</sup> Germany's emphasis on Ancient Greek culture appealed to Ibsen's desire to recreate Greek tragedy in a modern idiom. Though the character of Hedda Gabler is somewhat based on a “*Münchmerin*,” Peter Jelavich's term for a beautiful but suicidal woman Ibsen met and possibly had an affair with,<sup>187</sup> Ibsen likely had grander ideas in mind than merely a photogenic portrayal of a troubled friend.

There is something intrinsically German about Hedda Gabler: her demeanor, aloofness, poise, style, background, strength, education, aesthetic, inhibition,



strictness, and even her name “Gabler” represent an aristocracy decidedly non-Norwegian. Ibsen’s biographer Michael Meyer said that early critics of the play considered *Hedda Gabler* “the least Norwegian of Ibsen’s plays and that the town (unnamed as usual) in which the action takes place was less suggestive of Christiania than of a continental capital.”<sup>188</sup> But if not Norway, then where? Hedda’s father is an officer of the highest rank. Norway hardly boasted a strong military history or background; but Germany in 1888 through 1890, during the time Ibsen wrote the play, certainly possessed an indelible military culture. Hedda’s father, moreover, hovers in an upstage portrait. General Gabler’s link to Hedda is through the portrait and the pistols, which loom large in the play. They are the weapons Hedda toys with, they are used to kill Lovborg and Hedda, they are wielded at Brack as he enters through the back way, and they connote priapic-phallic meaning. But most importantly they contain the bond with her father. Caroline Mayerson, quoting Ibsen, makes this point that “Through Hedda’s attitude toward and uses of the pistols, Ibsen constantly reminds us that Hedda ‘is to be regarded rather as her father’s daughter than as her husband’s wife.’ Clearly the pistols are linked with certain values of her background which Hedda cherishes.”<sup>189</sup> Most evident is the military connection: German victory in the Franco-Prussia war (1870–1) established German military might that would endure (regrettably) for years to come. And there is more to point to a Germanic Hedda.

During the nineteenth century the German middle class underwent a transformation. Rather than progressivism sweeping Europe at the time, many in the German middle class longed for the romanticism associated with the Middle Ages. They desired a lost simplicity that characterized medieval German romanticism, which included scorn for materialism and desire for patriarchy and aesthetic beauty. Instead of what was perceived as the dreary philistinism and banal modernism of transforming Europe – with its petty selfishness, vulgar careerism, and rising capitalism – Germans looked to the chivalric communalism and nobility of an earlier age. German intellectuals had, by the late nineteenth century, rallied in defense of a superior culture besieged by barbarians. (Thomas Mann, hardly a raging nationalist, wrote about the need to defend Germany’s unique intellectual heritage and profundity). Benedetto Croce captures this point when he remarks that Hedda Gabler “despises and scorns her laborious, good-natured and mediocre husband, and those holy women, his old aunts; she cannot endure to hear even a whisper of domestic life, of sons or of any sort of duties; she shrinks from infidelity and adultery, as of things common and vulgar; yet she feels herself immersed in the vulgar and commonplace, and worries herself to death, because, although she has no scruple as to the means to be adopted, she seeks the world vainly for ‘something free and courageous, something illumined with a ray of absolute beauty.’”<sup>190</sup> The Dionysian spirit Hedda refers to throughout the play – “vine

leaves in his hair” – can be interpreted as the merging of Hellenic classicism and Germanic romanticism, an admixture of medieval adventurism and ancient dignity combining Nietzschean ritualism, Dionysian aesthetics, Apollonian intellect, and Romantic chivalry – entities strongly associated with German heritage and culture.

In a letter of December 1890, Ibsen wrote to his friend that in *Hedda Gabler* “I have not really intended to treat so-called problems. The main thing for me has been to depict human beings, their humours and their destinies, against a background of certain operative social conditions and attitudes.”<sup>191</sup> Ibsen’s notorious disinclination to clarify his intentions leaves us with these generalities. But Hedda’s repeated phrase “vine leaves in his hair” reveals and possibly clarifies an objective correlative between symbol and “operative social conditions.” While the German audiences at the original opening in late January and early February of 1891 found the expression incomprehensible, over the years the “vine leaves” phrase has come to mean very much what Nietzsche intended by the Dionysian “eternal joy of existence [*Lust des Daseins*],” whereby “for a brief moment *primordial being* itself, feeling its raging desire for existence and joy in existence” is “the indestructibility and eternity of this joy.”<sup>192</sup> Hedda’s lust for joy can be linked to a primordial desire to return to a time before the encroachment of bourgeois conventions, before the rapidity of modernism, with its discarding of aristocracy and emphasis on hasty transformations and fiduciary concerns. Hedda, along Nietzschean lines, longs for what Lovborg calls in the play her “hunger for life,” and what James McFarlane calls “a pagan priestess, driven by a vision of Dionysian beauty, whispering of vine-leaves in the hair and the thrill of beautiful death.”<sup>193</sup> The life she hungers for is an other-worldly past fixed in time and irrelevant to the modern progressivism in which she lives. Hedda is locked in a static past while around her the world is moving rapidly; moreover, Hedda, pregnant, can hardly anticipate with glee the trajectory of middle-class life expected of her: raising children, attending the requisite PTA (parent-teacher association) meetings, cozying up to the cackle of Aunts on Sundays, and living to a sanguine old age under Tesman’s roof. She sees Aunt Julia as a reflection of herself in thirty years and can hardly bear the thought. Her restlessness can be attributed to her spoiled upbringing, but something more lies beneath the rebellious yearnings for libertarian joy. Benjamin Bennett contends that there is a “basic affinity between German drama and German idealist philosophy as a whole.” Both movements, he says, arose “in response to a feeling of helpless fragmentation, of self-conscious alienation between man and nature, subject and object, individual and community, a feeling which in late eighteenth-century Germany becomes especially strong because of the Germans’ sense of cultural immaturity and inferiority, their lack of a self-confident literary and artistic tradition, their dependence on

foreign models.”<sup>194</sup> Hedda’s sense of entrapment is enacted through her desire for beauty and her feeling of fragmentation – of being apart from the modernist flow of history. She is alienated and like a Wagnerian operatic figure, she wants to experience a thrilling joy of romantic chivalry. Instead she is marooned in a kitschy world of slippers and cooing Aunts; routine sex and petty affairs; and forthcoming shrillness of screaming and pouting children. Her vision of life is grander, opulent, and suspicious of the world she is being dragged into.

If Hedda is Ibsen’s version of Wagner’s Brünnhilde, an oversized and mythic medieval heroine, then her suitors are the antithesis: modern-day professor, lawyer, and bohemian.<sup>195</sup> They are the quintessential cosmopolitan moderns: urbane, sophisticated, educated, manipulative, rapidly moving about and, in the eyes of many European anti-Semites, impregnators of European traditions of racial purity. Peter Gay remarks that “Almost from the start, modernism was a cosmopolitan phenomenon.” Artists like Ibsen observed these (Brack, Lovborg, and Tesman) cosmopolitans chafing against the old world order. It was in Germany, more than anywhere else, that this conflict of old versus new occurred. Gay reminds us that “Ibsen was an acceptable playwright in Germany years before he conquered Britain,”<sup>196</sup> in part because he had his finger on the pulse of modernism and German culture; the tension of this play reveals the pull of the past and push to “breakthrough,” what Arnold Weinstein calls *genombrott* – of Scandinavian literature (and in turn all European literature), that underscore modernism’s “obsession with power, its entangled view of God and Patriarchy, its search for freedoms at once artistic and moral.”<sup>197</sup>

Hedda commands the attention of three men in her fatal orbit: the reliable but unimaginative academic; the semi-reformed debaucher and futurist social thinker; and the calculating hedonistic lawyer. They are, in essence, modern men who, by virtue of their desire for Hedda, attempt to merge – impregnate (!) – their modernist DNA with a mythically utopian Germania. Unlike Hedda, they circulate in a modern bourgeois world of finance, academia, and radical intellectuals. Hedda’s aversion to Tesman’s touchy-feely relationship to his Aunts is not merely a clash of ethics; it delves deeply into the lifestyles of the Viking spirit of iron and blood versus the *heimische* bonding of the Tesman coterie. Of course Tesman’s love of his slippers and his puerile ties to the doting Aunts who raised him can epitomize any generic middle-class family; but the animus Hedda has for his familial relationship is rooted in a deeply felt antagonism that arises from a clash of cultures. Evert Sprinchorn alludes to this conflict between the medieval romantic and the modern bourgeoisie when he says that “Behind the middle-class world of the late nineteenth century, spatially and chronologically, lies the world of the barbarians, the Vikings, the precursors of the aristocratic class that has been pretty much

replaced by the bourgeoisie, leaving behind only a few relics like Hedda.” Yet, among the bourgeoisie, “there has sprung up a group, the Bohemians, that spurns the values of the tradesman and has formulated its own code of ethics.” Opposing the middle-class values as hypocritical, “In Hedda’s drawing room the Philistines and the Bohemians collide.”<sup>198</sup> Hedda observes this clash between philistine Tesman and bohemian Lovborg, but she is apart from it because she has no stake in it.

In only five years after *Hedda Gabler*, the Dreyfus Affair would rip apart European culture, exposing the festering anti-Semitism that lay barely beneath the surface. While Ibsen lived in Germany, the epoch of rising progressivism and cosmopolitan optimism often associated with Judaism would confront the countervailing wave of toxic hatred and recidivism that poisoned the next half century of European history. In a letter to his friend Georg Brandes (Feb. 14, 1871), Ibsen referred to the Jews as the “aristocracy of the human race” because they did not have their own homeland; free from chauvinism and nationalistic prejudice, they enjoyed an internationalism in their Diaspora.<sup>199</sup> However, by the late nineteenth century the Jew was also, crudely put, the enemy within; someone who, even if born and raised in the local hometown, was part of another political as well as religious entity, and the Jews of the city in particular were referred to not as a community but as “the Jewish nation.” Like Gypsies, the Jews were perceived as nomads, not pure bloods but peregrinate invaders who overtook land, culture, and even language. Observe, for instance, how close Yiddish is to German; some have even argued that Yiddish is a German dialect. In *The Jewish Century*, Yuri Slezkine writes that “In an age of service nomadism, the Jews became the chosen people by becoming the model ‘moderns.’” This modernism spawned an “endless pursuit of wealth and learning, with both careers open to talent, as in the shtetl or ghetto, and most talents taking up traditional Mercurian occupations: entrepreneurship, of course, but also medicine, law, journalism, and science.”<sup>200</sup> Tesman, Brack, and Lovborg are inextricably tied to Slezkine’s “moderns,” representing everything mercurial and adventurous in European culture, everything associated with modernism: progressive, academic, radical, jurisprudence, and in the case of money associated with Hedda’s home and lifestyle, a focus on finance, loans, mortgages, bank accounts, and collateral. Frederick Karl points out that “In nearly every society in which Modern was perceived (rightfully) as threatening authority, as a subverter of stability, Modernism and Jews were linked. The latter were perceived as playing an unusually large role in the development of modern ideas and, by extension, anarchy, political radicalism, socialism, as well as capitalism (‘Jewish capitalism’). Anti-Semitic movements, accordingly, were often indistinguishable from anti-Modern movements.” In other words, “the opposition to Modernism identified whatever it hated with Jews.”<sup>201</sup> If Hedda

is the atavistic recipient of endowed cultural pedigree and an anti-modernist Luddite in her tenacious hold on her military upbringing, then the three men in her life have no such lineage, but instead climb to positions of power (and threaten Hedda's power) through the ascendancy of modernism and what Slezkine calls the Mercurian spontaneity of a people on the outside trying to enter the new portals of security and success. In France and Germany, in particular, this modernism was viewed skeptically, a crisis depicting the decline of Christianity and worse – the eradication of medieval values based on chivalry, militarism, romanticism, and blood purification. The decline was occurring under the demoralizing pressure of modern art and commerce, which was perceived as resulting from Jewish cultural influences: bankers, lawyers, scholars, historians, philosophers, atheists, Marxists, and avant-garde decadent artists who valued history (Tesman), abstract thinking (Lovborg), and law (Brack) as the building blocks of a new society. These Mercurial skills, along with the exclusive exposure to finance (for centuries Jews were unable to own land so banking, lending, and commerce became the few trades available), frequently gave Jews the upper hand in the human capital of loans and finance so necessary to succeed in modern capitalism. The wave of change occurring in Europe and heralded as modernism also paralleled the ascendancy of modern Judaism.<sup>202</sup> For many late-nineteenth-century theologians, racial purists, and nationalists, this ominous transformation marked the destruction of ethnic identity; Jews, the quintessential nomads, were crossing borders and disintegrating racial purity, flattening national boundaries, and cross-pollinating tradition. If Hedda is anything, she is the descendant of tradition and signifier of unsullied racial atavism; her suitors, in this scenario, are opportunistic vultures seeking to corrupt Hedda's pure blood lines, and reflect the climbing class of capitalists that Strindberg depicted in the character of Jean in his play *Miss Julie* (and Ibsen was certainly aware of Strindberg's play). Like Strindberg, Ibsen was cognizant of Darwinian evolutionism. Hedda represents the enervated upper class doomed to be replaced by the more forceful middle class – and who, in Europe, epitomized the ascending middle class more than Jews?

I'm hardly suggesting that Ibsen is anti-Semitic; quite the opposite – Ibsen is calling attention to a clash of cultures that would have devastating consequences in a mere generation to come. Hedda's suitors personify all that was modern in the late nineteenth century: bourgeoisie, both in the norm and the discontent, they worked within and without the system, shaping its very contours by being its proponents and antagonists. Jews, Yuri Slezkine writes, "stood for the discontents of the Modern Age as much as they did for its accomplishments. Jewishness and existential loneliness became synonyms, or at least close intellectual associates. 'Modernism' as the autopsy and indictment of modern life was not Jewish any more than it was

‘degenerate,’ but there is little doubt that Jewishness became one of its most important themes, symbols, and inspirations.”<sup>203</sup>

Lovborg represents the radical element: bohemian, hedonist, avant garde, and profoundly brilliant in writing a history about the future; but also debaucher, lonely, outside the mainstream and challenging the status quo. He is the quintessential modern rebel: brilliant, creative, passionate, living for the moment, and uncontrollably at the mercy of his addictions. It would hardly be a stretch of the imagination to see him entering the stage like James Dean’s *Rebel Without a Cause* and carrying a dog-eared copy of the *Communist Manifesto* in his back pocket. Lovborg’s audacity is compounded by his manuscript dealing with the history of the future. Not only is this a contradiction in terms, Jews, Walter Benjamin reminds us, “were prohibited from investigating the future” because “For every second of time was the strait gaze through which the Messiah might enter.”<sup>204</sup> Despite this theoretical if not actual Judaism in Lovborg, Jews no longer had a claim on the Messiah; yet Lovborg is not only defying the edict, he arrogantly flaunts his defiance. He enters the stage in Messianic terms; he has returned – the prodigal son arisen and resurrected – not enveloped in and by Christian humility but rather arrogantly maintaining his radical, non-conformist behavior. Judge Brack (actually the term Ibsen uses is “Advocate” Brack, which suggests both lawyer and judge), Ibsen wrote in his notes for the play, “is an elegant socialite, who often used to come to the General’s and who was Hedda’s acknowledged escort to the ball. He is a bachelor and 42–43 years old. Converses well but with an undertone of impropriety.”<sup>205</sup> Escort, but not the man to commit; elegantly conversant, but transgressor of Victorian etiquette; educated, but also moves with an “undertone of impropriety” amongst boudoirs and prostitutes. He is the chameleon figure of changeability, acknowledged legal and financial consultant, and able to traverse effortlessly amongst Christians yet capable of fading back into his own “tribe.” He personifies Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, what Walter Benjamin would later personify as the quintessential modernist: the shopping-mall stroller (upscale, in Brack’s case), enjoying the material pleasures of modernism, buying and exchanging things (and people). Ibsen orchestrates Brack’s stage movements in and out of the play, drifting through back doors, coming in unannounced, and staying up all night with his bacchanal “bachelor” parties. Brack is the lawyer who helps Tesman obtain loans in order to finance the purchase of the house Hedda desires. The undercurrent here is evident in the Cabbalist connection between fellow Jews, what would become the centerpiece argument of the perfidious *Protocol of the Elders of Zion*. Brack is also the sensualist, refusing to follow conventional marriage, remaining instead the seductive bachelor. His shindigs – periodic bachelor parties – are populated by VIPs and call-girls. He disregards traditional social hierarchy; he, in fact, dismantles it altogether, flaunting his discreet “gatherings”

under the veil of his status (lawyer) and “education.” The uxorious Tesman is the quintessential academic; he follows all the rules of dissertation writing, expecting to gain his proper station in the University provided he researches the most boring and meaningless parcel of historical data. He is the social-climbing opportunist, currying favor whenever it fits his needs. Nerd, but not spineless milquetoast (as he is too often played); well-read, but unimaginative; Tesman personifies the boorish but productive and scheming academic. He must publish or perish, and publish he will, but what he publishes matters little; no one will read it or take it seriously. Unlike the creative Lovborg, he is the Talmudic scholar who transcribes rather than describes, copies texts rather than proffers innovative thinking, and plays the game of academic politics perfectly, dutifully, and diligently. Finally, there is the ethnic code of rationalism; Jewish orthodoxy based its superiority to other religions by claiming to be intellectual over instinctual. “People don’t do such things” (778) Judge Brack says in the last words of the play, intoning reasonableness antithetical to the suicidal extremist Hedda and her romantic longings. Brack ends the play, along with Tesman, because they are the modernist who will march rationally into the twentieth century.

Ibsen, I maintain, is not taking sides. He is merely using these symbolic points, subtly understated, to demonstrate a social condition he observed during his stay in Germany. Hedda is ill-equipped to deal with this encroaching modernism, isolated by her history, status, social class, and personality to positions increasingly out of kilter with modernism. She is, in fact, literally pushed off the stage through the course of the play. The stage space is her *Lebensraum*, her living quarters, in which each successive *mise-en-scène* takes something away from Hedda – horse, servant, piano, social event, desk, and eventually her very place on the stage – encircling her in what Stanton Garner calls Hedda’s “scenic claustrophobia.”<sup>206</sup> In the end, she is pushed out of her very house and offstage because Tesman and Thea need her desk to work on reconstructing Lovborg’s manuscript. If, as any actor will attest, center stage is the seat of power in the theatre, then Hedda, the protagonist, is literally pushed out of power. She becomes superfluous, an existentialist not by choice but by circumstance, because her aristocratic upbringing and traditional ways are useless in a modern world. In Germany, there was a strong urge to move into the modern world and an equally strong sentiment against this movement; the Nazis tried to incorporate both. They were simultaneously enthusiasts and enemies of modern life: they wanted a strong Germanic tradition – the swastika and its emblematic medieval connotations, for instance – combined with modern technology. To the Nazis the Jews were entirely one-sided in their emphasis on modernism, devaluing the honor associated with the Germanic past and the purity of racial tradition. If my thesis is to hold, then we must look again to Yuri Slezkine’s hypothesis, that the “Jewish age was also the Age of

Anti-Semitism. Because of their Mercurian training, the Jews excelled in the entrepreneurial and professional occupations that were the source of status and power in the modern state; because of their Mercurian past, they were tribal strangers who did not belong in the modern state, let alone in its centers of power.”<sup>207</sup> Hedda is surrounded by a world of strangers, out of place and literally pushed from her role as protagonist. She is denied her *Lebensraum*, her living quarters; at the very beginning, Hedda is appalled by the invasion of her space, with flowers and Aunt Julie’s hat. The fact that all three suitors sexually desire Hedda – and Hedda is already carrying the child of one of them – adds fuel to the burning resentment against bourgeois (read Jewish) impregnation. The crisis of Jews and Germans that would engulf Europe in the next forty years is in its germination in this play: the invasion of her three suitors epitomizes the usurpers of Hedda’s divine right to hold center stage. Hitler and his romantic-nihilistic ilk would have been raised observing this play, and it is no coincidence that, after *The Merchant of Venice*, Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* and *Peer Gynt* were the most widely produced plays in Nazi Germany.<sup>208</sup> Ibsen’s prescience is, perhaps, cautioning German audiences, a warning that went unheeded.

### Faith and Happiness in *The Master Builder*

*The Master Builder* is Ibsen’s portrait of an aging prima donna. Halvard Solness, superstar architect, is mired in a mid-life crisis of confidence. Solness is a study of contradictions: famous architect, known for his spires, but is fearful of heights; proud and stubborn, yet is consumed by guilt that his success has left others unhappy; arrogant, yet fearful that younger talents will usurp his authority; manipulative, yet capable of altruism. He is rebel and troll, and all of his characteristics are illuminated by the appearance of Hilde Wangel, a young woman who has admired him since he visited her hometown when he came to build a Church. In preliminary notes to the play, Ibsen wrote the following poem:

They sat there, those two, in so snug a house in autumn and in winter days.  
Then the house burnt. All lies in ruins. Those two must rake in the ashes.  
For among them a jewel is hidden, a jewel that can never burn.  
And if they search diligently, it might perhaps be found by him or her.  
But even if this fire-scarred pair ever do find that precious fireproof jewel  
She will never find the burnt faith [*tro*], he never his burnt happiness [*lykke*].<sup>209</sup>

Like *Ghosts*, *The Master Builder* is impacted by images of light and darkness, reflecting a character on the cusp of pre-modern and modern. A kind of darkness is overtaking Solness; he may be going mad, given his Faustian



bargain for success. He is racked by guilt; the death of his child has changed Solness even more radically than his wife. He treats his assistant and assistant's son condescendingly, but he is committed to his altruism in building homes. He is bedeviled by youth, but also by the Norwegian folklore that devils enter homes through the cracks in the walls. He is conflicted in that he is a builder of middle-class homes (symbolizing interiority and darkness) and an architect of churches (exteriority and lightness). Solness is, in sum, obsessed with dwellings, secular and religious. Walter Benjamin contends that the "nineteenth century, like no other century, was addicted to dwelling. It conceived the residence as the receptacle for the person, and it encased him, with all his appurtenances, so deeply in the dwelling's interior that one might be reminded of the inside of a compass case, where the instrument with all its accessories lies embedded in deep, unusually violet folds of velvet." The interiority of Solness's "homes for human beings," Benjamin suggests, conflicts with the protagonist's architectural work in what might be termed the Germanic "Jugendstil" (in France dubbed *art nouveau*), the modernist movement towards outwardness, collectivism, and streets, popularized during the 1890s.<sup>210</sup>

For Solness, the past's dwelling on interiority and the present modernism's openness establishes the play's tension in the protagonist's psyche. His memory and his aims in life are also at odds: Solness seeks to refine his memory and to some degree his relationship with Hilda Wangel mirrors the author's relationship with Emilie Bardach (in 1889 she was 18 and Ibsen was 61). Ibsen referred to this as his "May sun of a September life" ["*an die Maisonnette eines Septemberlebens*"]. But in the play the relationship is blurred; we do not know exactly how or when Solness and Hilde met, because memories have blurred. She contains a kind of mythic quality, a combination of people in Solness's past and a certain reality. Like *Hedda Gabler*, the underlying motives of Ibsen's characters are growing more opaque because motive and memory are dislodging. Ibsen does not, as he had in other plays, reveal the clarity of linear motivation because he is interested in the way memory is unreliable. In his last four plays Ibsen remains a realist, but moves decidedly towards impressionism and even expressionism by undercutting the smooth lines of realism. Benjamin Bennett writes that in *The Master Builder* "it is not possible to establish beyond doubt even the bare facts of the past relation between Solness and Hilde. Just as the impressionists turn away from the direct conventional representation of space, and seek rather to represent the combination of data and process from which we infer our idea of space in reality, so Ibsen turns from representation of time to the adumbration of the mental processes by which an idea of time arises in us."<sup>211</sup>

The skyscraper and unlimited tall building are the symbols of modernism. If these towering structures represent a belief in the limitless acclivity and

expansion of technology and the positivism associated with modernism, then a vertiginous sense of falling, that the whole edifice might topple like an ill-stacked house of cards, has also been the symbolic framework on the flipside of modernism's equation. Ibsen capitalizes on architecture as a modernist dialectic of upward mobility and downward spiral. Solness was expected, as a builder, to construct a Church in a fjord-town, Lysanger, and the final act was to place a wreath on the top of its spire. But he suffers from vertigo and fails to complete this ritual duty of the wreath; instead, he builds homes. The churches he speaks of can be viewed as representing Norway's remarkable architecture, built on the sites of Viking holy ground, situated in high, open, prominent locations, and reflecting Nordic building methods and mythology; churches illustrated conflicting images between pagan and Christian iconography. Scandinavian Stave Churches were beginning to be appreciated in the 1880s and 1890s, but Ibsen's ambivalence reflected conflicting views of his native country. Solness chooses to build homes instead of churches; given the improved economic climate of the period, this is a propitious decision. Private dwellings for the middle class were more lucrative than churches, since religious worship declined precipitously at the time. Yet Solness's past belief in church construction will gnaw continually at his conscience. The Viking-Christian core of his being challenges his belief in the so-called "happy homes" he creates; the dedication he pursues in these homes is called into question and is no easier to live with than his earlier ideals. His private life makes a mockery of his religious and altruistic pursuits. At the end, shortly before his death, Solness comes to the grim realization that his work amounts to little more than an illusion. No amount of work on behalf of people can obscure his self-deception and betrayal; no amount of lofty rhetoric can expunge past transgressions; and no amount of piety can erase corruption.

Perhaps no play in Ibsen's final twelve-play cycle is more auto-biographical, for it exposes the author as a conscious man of the community lusting after young women, a social being prone to privacy and isolation, and a denier of politics yet a superb negotiator of Machiavellian intrigue. The play is a correlative to Ibsen's moment in life, returning to Norway after a long absence, enormously successful yet keenly feeling his mortality, experiencing his mid-life cravings of romance with a much younger woman, and a marriage grown weary though not entirely exhausted. Here, too, are the conflicts of modernism and antiquity, homes tugging against religious spires. The present, with its sweeping thrust of modernism, is brought back down by the shattering reappearance of Hilde, the figure evocative of Eros against the ever-consuming shadow of Thanatos. No amount of success can shield Solness's vulnerability; his marriage is a failure because his libido is "free," a freedom Ibsen so desired and yet which became his (and Solness's) undoing.

## Children and Lust in Ibsen's *Little Eyolf*

In comparison to his total output, *Little Eyolf* is a remarkably short play. Its three acts are compact, there are only six characters (two disappear after the first act), and the force of the drama moves with remarkable speed. The entire action takes place on the Allmers's estate beside the fjord, on the outskirts of town: Act One in the garden room, Act Two on a glen by the shore, and the third on a stretch of high ground, densely covered with shrubs, in Allmers's garden. The mood is inward, reflective, contemplative. The basic action, the death of a child, occurs off stage, but the audience experiences its ramifications for the parents. It is one of the frankest plays dealing with sexuality ever written: eroticism, a woman's unsatisfied sexual desires, and the consequences of sexual passion. From the very beginning we see a child disabled because, prior to the opening of the play, the parents were making love, and while in the act of love-making left the child unattended on a table. The child fell, crippled for life. Right from the start the tension between creative activity and creative love-making are at odds; that sex is an all-consuming act; and that the passions of the protagonists, Alfred Allmers and his wife Rita, continue to burn brightly even when their mutual responsibility in the accident make their lives a living hell. Additionally, Allmers is only able to communicate with his supposed half-sister, Asta. Rita is thus jealous on all fronts. No matter: they can't keep their hands off each other.

Ibsen loves to challenge actors. Not only does he create the intimacy of lust and guilt simultaneously, he does two things one should never do in the theatre: in the first act he puts the characters onstage with a child and a dog. Their appearance violates all the unspoken rules because children and animals upstage adults. They are too spontaneous and believable, overwhelming even the best actors because of their unpredictability. The lustful desires of Allmers and Rita therefore need to be as vivid, real, and as immediate as the child and the dog; their need for each other, physically and erotically, can have no pretense of fakery. The lust had better be palpable and in the moment or it will be upstaged. Once Eyolf and the dog are off stage, the actors must contend with their immediate feelings of loss and guilt in the second act.

ALLMERS: Now, it's come true – what you wished for.

RITA: I? What did I wish for?

ALLMERS: That Eyolf wasn't here.

RITA: I've never on my life wished that! For Eyolf not to come between us– that's all I wanted.

ALLMERS: Well – from now on, he won't anymore.

RITA: (*Softly, staring straight ahead*). Maybe now, most of all. (*With a start*). Oh, that awful sight!

ALLMERS: The child's evil eyes, yes (907).

Ironically, Allmers is writing a book titled *Humanity's Responsibility* (*Det menneskelige Ansvar*). But he is unable to attend to his child, to take *this* responsibility seriously. Upon the arrival of the Rat-wife (*Rottejomfruen*), the child is immediately drawn to her. She represents *Varg* (873), meaning wolf, from Grimm's fairy tale, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*. She lures him to his doom right under the parents' eyes. And "seeing" is again a key theme. Floating crutch, the crucifixion image – everything in this play points to the child seeing the adults. "Fueled by *Little Eyolf*," Michael Goldman contends, "we may think of Ibsen's theater as the seeing place for a child's vengeance, where the force of the action is a kind of seeing vengeance *on* the adult world, on us and through us. We see with the eyes of the child, and at the same time we feel the child's gaze directed at us."<sup>212</sup> Ibsen, like other modernists, was inspired by children, which was his way of connecting to the unconscious; instead of an obstacle, the "inner child" (as well as inner madness) unleashed a fount of creativity. "The task of childhood," writes Walter Benjamin, "is to bring the new world into symbolic space. The child, in fact, can do what the grownup absolutely cannot: recognize the new once again."<sup>213</sup> Plants, forests, mountains, sea, water lilies, stars, and animals abound in the play, as if Ibsen's characters are seeing the world child-like, for the first time. The death of a child can awaken the senses; the inexplicable and inexpressible anguish forces people to "see" and "hear" sharper, as if seeing and hearing might provide some answer. Children often figure in Ibsen, too, because they are among the most vulnerable, symbolizing a social order in which adults are victimized and spiritually adrift. Children are natural reformists juxtaposed against adults, forcing grownups to take immediate responsibility or appear weak.

The play is the conflict between Eros and Thanatos, sex and death, and somewhere in between are the Nietzschean "petty, earth-bound bourgeoisie" struggling to make a leap of faith. Eyolf is a pawn in the adult sexual game. Three adult people talk a good game about responsibility – one is even writing a book on it – but they are in fact child-like in their selfishness and *ir*responsibility. They are also, along with Rosmer and Rebecca, one of the most sexually charged couples in dramatic literature. They are fornicating when their disabled son drowns; they are so much in heat they fail to hear the cries of other children calling for help; and the interlocking passion burns so deeply that during love-making Allmers mistakenly calls out Eyolf. There is, moreover, a wonderful ambiguity in the ending; the raising of the flag signals an attempt to reach across the fjord, but their attempt is merely symbolic. Their philanthropy is coupled with an air of moral superiority to the town urchins. Ibsen's biographer Michael Meyers asserts that "the third act of *Little Eyolf*, like the two that precede it, is among the greatest that Ibsen ever wrote, and that in it he achieved exactly what he set out to achieve, namely to reveal the interior of what, in *Brand*, thirty years before, he had called 'the Ice Church' – the interior of a human soul in which

love had died – so that, in Rita’s words, all that is left to her and Alfred is to ‘try to fill that emptiness with something. Something resembling love.’”<sup>214</sup>

Ibsen would continue in his final two plays to explore regrets that come with age. In *John Gabriel Borkman*, like *The Master Builder*, Ibsen considers the summation of success and its cost. Borkman – angry, regretful, and bitter – exposes his past: his control of a huge bank and the potential of a cabinet post, to his conviction for embezzlement and an eight-year self exile from all human contact. Like *The Wild Duck*, he is sequestered in an attic, but unlike the earlier play the upper regions of the house are dark and uninviting. His former lover, Ella Rentheim, appears unannounced; twenty years earlier he abandoned her to marry her sister, Gunhild. Borkman, like the principal character in Ibsen’s final play, *When We Dead Awaken*, dies at the moment he has broken free from his psychic exile. And in *When We Dead Awaken*, Ibsen’s final play, the characters are childless; all they have are memories of past glory.

“Only by grasping and absorbing my entire output as a consistent and continuing whole,” wrote Ibsen, “can one be aware of the precise impression I meant to convey by the individual parts.”<sup>215</sup> Thomas Whitaker notes, when Ella Rentheim and Mrs. Borkman in *Borkman* “clasp hands in a cold void that is symbolically identical with the Borkman closed room, the performed action has become a double image of self-exclusion and self-reflection.”<sup>216</sup> In the end Ibsen realizes, like most modernists, that we cannot connect. Hands reach across the void, only to find mutual loneliness and reclusiveness. Freedom from “trolls” is the goal of Ibsen’s characters, but isolation is the price they must pay.

# Chapter 3

## Unhinged Subjectivity

*Love between man and woman is war.*

– Strindberg<sup>217</sup>

*In madhouses, people say everything they think.*

– Strindberg<sup>218</sup>

Some killers do their work overtly, accentuating the violence. Others wield weapons quietly, carving up souls without spilling blood. In the plays of August Strindberg, men and women rip each other apart immaculately, using only searing gestures and lacerating words. From the opening of his plays there are already signs of trouble; anger escapes quickly like toxic gas, polluting relationships and encouraging recklessness. The violent feelings emerge in voices that are often calm, steady, rational, contemplative, and coherent; but nothing is placid in his plays, nothing pristine; condescension, bitterness, and calculation overtake relationships. His plays portray existential solitude interrupted by relationships that are needy and repulsive, cruel and sympathetic, vulgar and gentle. His scenes play out a balance between brutal emotionalism and physical disgust on the one hand, and delicacy and compassion on the other, like the ebb and flow of music. The emotions are raw and vulnerable, oscillating from one level to another. It is only secondary that Strindberg's plays enact his personal angst; if that were all they would be dull hagiography and predictable diatribes. Primarily they are theatrical: art over life, orchestrated like music emphasizing the emotional slaughter of one character done to the other with love.

August Strindberg (1849–1912) was a misogynist yet had three tempestuous marriages to powerful and creative women (and would likely have married a fourth time had he lived longer); he was irascible and idiosyncratic, yet compassionate and sensitive to the downtrodden; and he irritated and alienated

nearly everybody, yet his funeral was an international event. He was a playwright, autobiographer, chemist, journalist, essayist, photographer, painter, philosopher, and sociologist; he read widely and voraciously; he moved in virtually every intellectual circle of his time. He was, in short, a Renaissance modernist. Like Ibsen, his family experienced bankruptcy when he was young, leaving an indelible scar. He tried to be a doctor like Ibsen, but also failed his exams. He tried to be an actor and a journalist with little success. He worked as a librarian for eight years (1874–1882). During that time he wrote an autobiographical novel, *The Red Room*, which achieved modest success. From then on his writing career took hold and he was enormously prolific (there are approximately fifty volumes of his works). He wrote novels, nearly fifty plays, political essays, and scientific treatises. Like Ibsen, he began his career as a dramatist writing historical dramas; and like Ibsen, he left his native land, living abroad in Germany, France, Switzerland, and Denmark. During the 1880s he was prosecuted for blasphemy but was eventually acquitted. During the 1880s and 1890s he was Ibsen's modernist rival; at every turn Strindberg wrote against what he believed to be Ibsen's faulty ideas. (Ibsen worked under Strindberg's gaze, too, allegedly hanging a picture of Strindberg above his writing desk and saying "I cannot write a line without that madman staring down at me with those mad eyes!"). Strindberg's rivalry with Ibsen, his critics, and his wives drove him to projects that ruined him financially and nearly destroyed him emotionally. Still he endured, and at the end of his life he established The Intimate Theatre (1907), which became a hallmark for Chamber theatres still relevant today (now often called "Black Box" theatres).

Strindberg wrote about his inner turmoil with unprecedented, unsparing, and unsentimental honesty. His dialogue ricochets with thoughts and feelings, zigzagging from one anguish and mishap to another. No other playwright has influenced modern drama as much. Eric Bentley asserts that "If the autobiography establishes Strindberg's Romanticist affiliation it also proves him one of the founders of Modernism. This is no paradox. In the perspective of today Romantic and Modern do not indeed seem antithetical."<sup>219</sup> His work can be described as *unhinged subjectivity*: if modernist art turns inward, then the first dramatist to confront this inwardness and psychic trauma is Strindberg. His plays probe new recesses of feeling, enter into a stream of consciousness, unflinchingly present mental and emotional breakdowns, and have spawned schools of drama. Strindberg's aim was to de-center the subject, unhinge its inner workings and crack open the thing-in-itself. His art is self-exploratory through self-expression, but it is also art displacing the center of the self – dissolving, reconfiguring, and recreating an alchemic constellation of parts, fragments, and shards. Strindberg freed drama from rationalism; instead of linear sequences and logical causality, he let his characters express confusion, contradictions, and cross-purposes. He rejected stereotypes, with their

melodramatic certainties and recognizable caricatures, creating instead the fragmentary being and the division of labor that demarcates modern psychology. For Strindberg humans were not merely reflections of what they did or who they associated with; underneath there were also Jungian iconographic dreams and Freudian psychological configurations where the subconscious was more than a parallel universe to reality. Dreams and the subconscious were continuous, self-reflective, and emotionally part of our fabric, in many instances jigsaw puzzles trumping reality as the key to our psychic awareness and fractured formation of identity.

Strindberg lays the groundwork for playwrights who take up self-absorption. His uncompromising self-criticism (as well as his criticism of society) is the model of modern skepticism and enmity. He rejected the formal modes of representation prevalent during his lifetime, turning instead towards an emphasis on modernism's autonomy and abstraction. With vigor and originality so beguiling that its impact remains visible throughout the twentieth century, Strindberg imposed the concepts of naturalism, expressionism, and symbolism; shed light on a new way of viewing the subject in modern drama; and wrote insightfully about human relationships. His work is misogynistic, but his male characters hardly get away unscathed. His autobiographies were rife with hyperbole about his madness and poverty, and his treatment of others was reprehensible; yet he genuinely suffered mentally and, in the end, physically from stomach cancer. His experimental period, often referred to as the post-Inferno era (after 1897), produced creative works that re-conceptualized the notion of the subject in a way that would forever change modern drama. He unlocked our simplistic veneer of human beings and showed us fragmentary parts, contradictory needs, and misshapen forms. Harry G. Carlson claims that in Strindberg's dramas resides the "crazy quilt of contradictions," yielding the "flotsam and jetsam of Western civilization, cracked ideas and sundered icons." The patchwork that makes up Strindberg's oeuvre is indicative of the playwright's sponge-like mind. "One of the keys of Strindberg's art," Carlson says, is this insightful mixture "in almost equal parts, Darwinian Naturalism, Swedish folklore, Schopenhauerian pessimism, 1880s' psychological and political theories, Old Testament judgments and New mysticism."<sup>220</sup>

Strindberg's plays, both the early naturalistic dramas and the later expressionistic ones, share underlying themes: the psychic destabilization that is the benchmark of modernism. Like Nietzsche, Strindberg viewed reality as a spiraling vortex; there is no radical origination, no source where the search for truth comes to rest, no condition where one can say "this is the end-point." Rather, reality is continuous, repetitive, and illogical; for Strindberg, things happen ad hoc, spontaneously, and spurred on by an irrational will. The fount for the vision is the artist; in this Strindberg never rejects



Romanticism's notion of the artist as seer. Strindberg experiments with Darwinian determinism in his first two major plays, *Miss Julie* and *The Father*, but even here he is not entirely persuaded that naturalism, borrowed from Zola, is satisfactory. Nietzsche's view of causality can be taken as Strindberg's credo: "What has happened, at bottom? The feeling of valuelessness was reached with the realization that the overall character of existence may not be interpreted by means of the concept of 'aim,' the concept of 'unity,' or the concept of 'truth.' Existence has no goal or end; any comprehensive unity in the plurality of events is lacking: the character of existence is not true, is *false*. One simply lacks any reason for convincing oneself that there is a *true* world."<sup>221</sup>

Strindberg befriended Nietzsche, but it was Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard who also provided representative models. Charles Taylor calls Schopenhauer the "greatest, the most influential misanthrope of the nineteenth century," and "the greatest pessimist." The same can be said of Strindberg, and Taylor's description of Schopenhauer can suffice for Strindberg: Schopenhauer's philosophy was "a revolt against the Christian inspired requirements that we affirm the goodness of what is. He wanted to throw off once and for all this terrible burden that Christian civilization had laid on us; to declare reality evil once and for all, and have done with it."<sup>222</sup> For in Schopenhauer we experience a longing, which in turn leads to frustration of our wants and desires; the endless cycle of desire and frustration is driven by our feckless and reckless volition. The world is a grisly place, says Schopenhauer, where, if humans succeed in relieving pain, it is merely temporary; it will reappear "as the sex drive, passionate love, jealousy, envy, hatred, anxiety, ambition, miserliness, sickness, etc."<sup>223</sup> The libido for Strindberg is necessary yet evil, a magnet that devours. It is without compassion, charity, or redeeming virtue. It is nothing but concupiscence and lust, like Iago's description of jealousy, "A green eyed monster that doth mock the meat it feeds on."

During Strindberg's post-Inferno period, Søren Kierkegaard's influence prevailed, especially in Strindberg's series of four dramas known as the Chamber Plays (*Storm Weather*, *The Burned House*, *The Ghost Sonata*, and *The Pelican*). The presence of death and despair, and the power of faith that comes from accepting this, is relevant to Kierkegaard's existential philosophy and underlies Strindberg's themes. Kierkegaard writes that "despair is the sickness unto death" where one is "unable to die, yet not as though there were hope of life," since "the hopelessness is that even the last hope, death, is gone." In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard adds that "Infinite resignation is the last stage before faith," for only in infinite resignation can there be "talk of grasping existence on the strength of faith."<sup>224</sup> This bottoming out was for Strindberg a revelation and a motive to live. According to Freddie Rokem, in the Chamber Plays Strindberg "created a theatrical discourse of the *peisithanatos*, the persuader of

death, who, according to Kierkegaard, because of his powerful subject – death – creates an eloquent and powerful language.”<sup>225</sup>

For Strindberg, the modern world is filled with slippery failures to connect, where every character attempts an off-balance grab at reality only to find the object out of reach. It was part of his theory of the accidental, a universe of chance, that, like Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, was Strindberg’s reaction to the positivist assurance (put forth by Hegel) that the universe was knowable and filled with clues, if only we looked hard enough to find them. Like moving targets, nothing in life is stable, certain, or verifiable. The irrational and the uncontrollable were gateways to the subconscious and the occult, with its stratas and labyrinths. People, as Nietzsche would claim, have a will for power; but the power grab is never held for long. The strong and weak are in constant struggle, and while a stronger person may temporarily destroy the weaker, the status of power shifts abruptly, capriciously, and the weak assume power quickly, briefly, and tentatively, only to lose it again, and regain it again. The tug-of-war is a mind game with deadly consequences. In his well-known “Preface” to his play *Miss Julie*, Strindberg prescribes the mental processes of his characters that inform his dialogue, letting “minds work as irregularly as they do in real life, where no subject is quite exhausted before another mind engages at random some cog in the conversation and governs it for a while. My dialogue wanders here and there, gathers material in the first scenes which is later picked up, repeated, reworked, developed, and expanded like the theme in a piece of music.”<sup>226</sup>

While many modern writers often paraded calculated eccentricity as a badge of their artistry, composing self-described anxieties as signs of creativity, Strindberg’s plays sought an understanding and self-examination at a level his contemporaries could barely match. He assimilated the notion of autobiographic self-consciousness that was the bailiwick of modernism and engaged it through his plays in unexpected ways, becoming both a subject and an ironic commentator on the subject. He toyed with personae, unreliable narrators, and psychoanalysis, finding new and complicated ways of presenting them. As he says in his autobiographical *Son of a Servant*: “There’s only one person’s life that we really know and that one is our own. And the great advantage to telling one’s own life is that one is dealing with a sympathetic and interesting person – right? And if one is interested in a person, one looks for the motive behind the acts.”<sup>227</sup>

Underneath the surface was Strindberg’s psychic trauma. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) defines trauma as “a psychic injury, especially one caused by emotional shock the memory of which is repressed and remains unhealed; an internal injury, especially to the brain, which may result in a behavioral disorder of organic origins.” It was first used in psychoanalysis by William James in 1894, and assigned a role in Freud’s study of sexual abuse

and psycho-sexual “abnormalities.” As the world grew more complex, the subject grew fragmented, resulting, in part, from the ascendancy of the urban over the rural, prompting Walter Benjamin to remark that “Fear, revulsion, and horror were the emotions which the big-city crowd aroused in those who first observed it.”<sup>228</sup> The transition to modernism was for many a traumatic experience; shocked by the new technological and hurried pace, subliminal fear overtook those unable to cope with rapid change. Strindberg summed it up in his “Preface” to *Miss Julie* when he said, “Since the persons in my play are modern characters, living in a transitional era more hurried and hysterical than the previous one, I have depicted them as more unstable, as torn and divided, a mixture of the old and the new.” As a result, “My souls – or characters – are conglomerations from various stages of culture, past and present, walking scrapbooks, shreds of human lives, tatters torn from the former fancy dresses that are now old rags – hodgepodes just like the human soul.”<sup>229</sup>

Strindberg heralded a new aesthetic invested in self-consciousness. Following Nietzsche, he maintained the self as multiple. The notion of a unitary, coherent self or soul is fiction. His “Preface” to *Miss Julie* is the declaration of modernism that human nature is elusive, contradictory, indeterminate, ambivalent, vacillating. It’s possible, for example, to experience both feelings of hatred and of lust towards the same person, as Strindberg himself did with his wives and lovers. The self as a field of coadunate forces and drives is a premise of Freud’s, whom Strindberg anticipates. The nineteenth century’s emphasis on realism and positivism had, for many, run its course; the interior mind, not objective reality, was the fount of creativity, so it was up to the artist to reject impartiality as a false contingent. He is one of the few playwrights to dramatize this psychological fillip, which is why his best plays are so unnerving. At his worst, his bloviated nihilism, obsessive narcissism, and puerile misogyny produce an occasional hothouse of shrill and malevolent melodrama. His topical-provocative subject matters and references to madness sometimes appear as flimsy sociological and psychological window-dressing for portraits of unhappy marriages that draw on melodramatic conventions and climactic conjugal tension. He was also corrupt in three important ways: he was exceedingly vain, capable of compulsive jealousy, and psychotically paranoid. He believed himself to be the instrument of Providence. Still, his virtues considerably outweigh his faults. He went headlong into the abyss of his own psychic fissures, unflinchingly observing his own shortcomings and bringing them into view. John Gassner said that Strindberg had the “capacity to make the unknown known, the hidden revealed, the unconscious conscious.” Either writing in realistic, naturalistic, expressionistic, or symbolic forms, he endeavored “to make subjective experience and vision objective,” evoking “order out of disorder,” and “let Ego prevail where Id was.”<sup>230</sup>

*The Father*

The play's protagonist, The Captain, is a nobleman, military officer, and patriarch. He represents a pre-modern era, and this play, Evert Sprinchorn contends, is where "man makes his last stand." I suggest that it is not so much "man" as it is "royalty," an age where monarchical authority's rule ends. Sprinchorn, however, correctly observes that the beleaguered Captain is not defeated by the number of women who surround him (wife, nanny, and child), but rather the "women are triumphant because in the struggle for survival physical strength is no longer a necessity. The battle of the sexes, which was won by the brute caveman in the distant past, has now become a battle of brains, of cunning, and in the conflict the more highly developed moral sense of man would prove to be his undoing."<sup>231</sup>

Strindberg's drama of a father who is led to believe that his daughter may or may not be his is, on the surface, a treatise against marriage. *The Father*, Margery Morgan maintains, "de-romanticizes marriage." Strindberg presents marriage as a "lifelong bondage" which can only produce "suffering and exhaustion."<sup>232</sup> But Strindberg is after something more than an attack on a social institution; he delves into the psychic trauma of an aristocrat's disintegration. A similar psychic trauma is represented in Édouard Manet's painting *The Execution of Maximilian* (1867–69), which examines a destruction of the aristocracy akin to Strindberg's destruction of the Captain. French imperial expansion motivated the Emperor Napoleon III to send a military force to Mexico in 1863. Acting as proxy for the French government, the Austrian Archduke Maximilian was placed on the Mexican throne. The French believed that the Americans, bogged down in Civil War, would be unable to challenge this land-grab encroachment. However, American pressure obliged the French military to withdraw, leaving Napoleon's protégé unsupported. Maximilian and two of his generals were captured by rebel forces and executed on June 19, 1867 at Querétaro. Although Manet did not witness the execution, he drew on news reports of the event that undermined French expansionist ambitions.

Manet's painting, based on Francisco de Goya's romantic *The Third of May* (1808), captures the betrayal of Maximilian by the French government. But unlike Goya's emotional depiction, Manet follows modernism's journalistic observance. According to Arthur Danto, the "three victims, holding hands, face the firing squad with fortitude. The officer standing apart loads his rifle dispassionately," in the event that any victim survives the first volley, and the whole scene is treated "dispassionately and journalistically."<sup>233</sup> A similar analysis can be said of Strindberg's Captain; he faces his psychic downfall with stoic fortitude; his emotional outbursts are balanced with attempts to hold together whatever dignity he can maintain. In the painting



Mamet, *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian*, 1868–69, Kunsthalle, Mannheim

the executed Maximilian and his two aids are nonplussed; the image is photographic; and the emphasis of the final executioner loading his gun gives the sense of prolonged time – that this execution is merely one of several violent moments to occur.

Impressionism can be seen as the first modernist breakthrough in art. During the 1860s Renoir, Manet, and Monet examined the effects of shadow, transient light, and adjacent color in order to cast a new perception on the visual, stressing what Clement Greenberg called “polyphonic.” There could be “no highlighting or dramatic centering,” Greenberg wrote; “the corners of the picture were to show the same clarity and come as close to the eye as the middle, and the projected field of vision was not permitted to blur toward its horizontal and vertical limits (in this respect impressionism violated its own naturalistic tenets and introduced, before cubism itself, the multiple point of view).”<sup>234</sup> What Greenberg called “flatness” was a de-centering of the subject and an emphasis on the whole canvas. This flatness, what Greenberg considers to be the key to modernism, first allows the viewer to linger on the canvas, juxtaposing one event against another, and second emphasizes the materiality of the canvas – the material basis of the medium. Strindberg’s use of the fourth wall is also a new invention of modernism, a new material basis of theatricality. We are immediately drawn in the play to the Captain’s multiple perspectives

that fracture his equilibrium, as well as observing him through an imaginary wall. We witness the breakdown of the Captain's consciousness in a new way – scientifically, clinically, and from multiple perspectives. Patrick McCaughey writes that in the painting at “the moment of the fusillade” the victims are out of focus. “Chillingly, it suggests that the executions are not simultaneous but sequential. The most vivid figure is the NCO, isolated on the right hand side, who cocks and checks his gun, preparing to deliver the coup de grace.” McCaughey notes three states of consciousness in the work: “the man who is about to die, the riveted concentration of the squad on their victims, and the indifferent NCO fiddling with his rifle.”<sup>235</sup> Each “state” is meant to be seen individually and as part of the whole; Renaissance perspectival certainty is replaced by foregrounding chaos; and the work gains power by cutting away from any lachrymose. Its value is not in an instant, but in its prolonged sense. Manet's aim, John Elderfield notes, is “both to collapse temporality into the instant of the execution and to allow, in the space around the depicted instant, intimations of protracted moments that prolong, rather than quite succeed, the shocking instant.”<sup>236</sup>

Strindberg is similarly attempting to show us the lingering effects of a mental breakdown. The aristocratic Captain is brought to his knees by a coolly detached wife, paranoia, and his faith in strict codes of moral conduct. He lacks the flexibility and adaptability that is the benchmark of modernism. Speaking to the Doctor, Laura says: “(*takes out her handkerchief*). My husband is mentally unbalanced [*själssjuk*]. Now you know. You will be able to judge for yourself later” (37). The judgment is not only the Doctor's, but ours as well; we see the mental collapse from several angles, perspectives, and vantage points: in his relationship to his wife, daughter, grandmother, the Pastor, and the Nurse; in relation to his scientific work and household accounting; in his relationship to his status as Captain; and in relation to his social “props,” the objects and costumes that define his patriarchy. All are flattened, spread out, and presented to the audience like an archeological display. Arnold Weinstein's observation about *The Father* pinpoints the “stripping away” effect that “lies in its multiple tongues, and its modernism lies in it vertiginous semiotic spectacle.” Hiding behind “the plot of gender warfare” resides a dismantling of the father; the protagonist stripped of his accoutrement, his accessories of fatherhood, patriarchy, aristocracy, military – all the props associated with his status. *The Father*, Weinstein says, “is a play about mantles, about the astonishing semiotic power they have” and the “central icon” is “the Captain's coat of many colors, the garment that accommodates both the green wool jacket and the golden coat of the past, that is mirrored again, reflective over the lion's skin and the shawl, the armor made of iron that becomes decoration.”<sup>237</sup> In the end the Captain is in a straight-jacket, an outward sign of his mental cartography. In a letter to the stage director August Falck, Strindberg notes the mental

state as well as the apparel of the Captain: “the Captain isn’t a coarse soldier but a scholar who has risen above his profession, gentle in the first act, a good child who hardens, becomes furious and ultimately goes mad. Detail: When he enters in the third act, he is in his shirt sleeves.”<sup>238</sup> Shorn of his military regalia, with its medals and colors, he is disarmed, demonstrating the garment’s power, or lack of honorific garments, to convey meaning.

Strindberg digs right down to the soul of the Captain and his traumatic disintegration. He is disabled by his rigid moral codes; unable to bend, he snaps. In his entreaties to his wife to tell him everything about his daughter’s birth, he admits to being child-like: “Don’t you see that I am as helpless as a child, can’t you hear me crying for pity like a child crying for its mother, can’t you forget that I am a man, a soldier who with a word can tame men and beasts?” (59). The Captain is regressing; all his power is wrapped up in his costume, but it is also hardwired into his soul and his will is losing its grip. Accusing his wife of turning everyone against him, he defends his condition: “My brain is, as you know, unaffected, since I can perform both my professional duties and my duties as a father. I still have my emotions more or less under control, and my will [*vilja*] is, to date, fairly unimpaired, but you have been chipping and chafing at it so that soon the cogs will disengage and the wheels will start whirling backwards” (56). In the battle of wills, Laura capitalizes on his vulnerability, instigating his descent into madness. Laura has the upper hand because of her flexibility and mental agility; the Captain is weakened by inflexibility.

Though many have accused Strindberg of misogyny – and there is certainly much truth to this – this accusation fails to tell the whole story. The Captain is a Procrustean bully, beginning the play ordering the Batman about and treating everyone like an underling. When the Batman fails to execute his orders precisely, the Captain complains to the Pastor: “I’ve sworn at him, and given him a tanning, but it doesn’t do any good” (27). We observe at once his controlling nature and violent authoritarianism. He goes on to complain about the upbringing of his child: “Well, you can’t patch a soul together like a damned quilt,” referring to the multiple ways she is raised; “I have the chief right to decide her future, and I’m obstructed whichever way I turn” (30). On the surface we would appear to sympathize with the Captain; he seems surrounded by usurpers and nags. Yet on close inspection his complaints are at best trivial and at most a resistance to modernism. The Captain’s jeremiad that you “can’t patch a soul together like a damned quilt” cuts against the grain of Strindberg’s professed belief that the modern individual is, indeed, a patchwork conglomeration. Most of the women want to impose religion on his daughter; is this, by itself, harmful? Laura wants her daughter to be an artist – hardly an infraction given that Strindberg himself was an artist. If anything, Laura wants her daughter to be a non-conformist – a painter! – untethered to nineteenth-century notions of a “woman’s place.” Arnold Weinstein points out that “the

play is astonishingly fair-minded in its findings, underscoring the Captain's fatuous complacency, his legalistic bullying, and his serene sense of the centrality of his function within the world order. Strindberg has not balked at any of this, and he has drained the cup of male humiliation to the dregs, as he takes this man apart, all the while thinking he's waging war against women."<sup>239</sup>

The Captain's fear of cuckoldry is the catalyst for his mental decline. This denotes the Captain's weakness, lacking confidence in his masculine-sexual identity. Laura has a will of iron, forged in modern terms: forceful but flexible, able to change gears instantly. The Pastor, Laura's brother, warns the Captain that Laura will be obdurate: "I'm afraid things aren't going to be easy. When she was a child, she used to lie absolutely still like a corpse until she'd got what she wanted. And when she'd got it, she'd give it back, explaining that it wasn't the *thing* she wanted, simply the fact of having her will" (31). Laura is, to be sure, willful, spoiled, and recalcitrant; but in the context of the late nineteenth century, women had little if any control over their lives or the lives of their children. Either women acquiesced and lived within their limited circumstances, or rebelled through bitchiness. Laura is, John Peter observes, "like an avenging angel against whom a great crime, called life, has been committed. Her sexuality illustrates but does not explain her all-consuming desire for power."<sup>240</sup> Denied access to power by social conformity, she calculates control of her daughter's future. And, unlike the Pastor's observations, her desires for her daughter's well-being are indeed consistent.

### *Miss Julie*

Right from the start Strindberg picks up the notions of madness, status, and flexibility left off from *The Father*. "Miss Julie's gone mad again tonight, completely mad!" says the servant Jean at the beginning of Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1888). He says this to his fiancée, cook and house-cleaner Christine, in the basement kitchen where they work. He enters carrying a pair of big riding boots he is required to polish; the unseen father is having his boots polished by the subservient Jean, a sensual opportunist always on the prowl to better his position. As he tries to ascend (a product of a rising bourgeoisie), Miss Julie is the counterpoint: a relic of a crumbling European aristocracy on the decline. Miss Julie shares with the Captain an old world moral order and her inflexibility, like the Captain's, is her undoing. Jean, like Laura in *The Father*, survives because he adapts; in these two Darwinian plays only those who are able to relinquish the past prevail. Strindberg reminds us of modernism's vitality and success-drive, its rational efficiency and flexibility, and its cunning and ruthlessness. In the take-no-prisoners cultural war of past and future, modernism's protean slipperiness is the vanquisher.



On the character of Miss Julie, Strindberg wrote that there are many possible motives for Miss Julie's "tragic fate": "the mother's basic instincts, her father's improper up-bringing of the girl, her own inborn nature, and her fiancé's sway over her weak and degenerate mind. Further and more immediately: the festive atmosphere of Midsummer Eve, her father's absence, her monthly illness, her preoccupation with animals, the erotic excitement of the dance, the long summer twilight; the highly aphrodisiac influence of the flowers, and finally, chance itself which drives two people together into an out-of-the-way room, plus the boldness of the aroused man." He adds: "I am proud to say that this complicated way of looking at things is in tune with the times."<sup>241</sup> The multiplicity of motives (*La multiplicité du moi*) was made popular by the psychologist Théodule Ribot (who influenced Stanislavsky) and Nietzsche, and Strindberg exemplified the intricate switch-board of motives. Strindberg suggests that human beings adopt a role in reaction to the one presented by their collocutors and that we shift roles throughout relationships.

*Miss Julie* is Strindberg's most popular play because it is easy to produce (three characters, one set, and a swiftly paced ninety minute one-act), and mostly because it is a powerful psychological study of eroticism, class conflict, and shocking subject matter. The plot is simple: the daughter of a count is intoxicated by a mid-summer evening passion, consummates a voracious sexual relation with her servant who longs to be her mate, becomes ashamed of the assignation, and commits suicide. But the plot description fails to explain the complex relationship adroitly orchestrated by Strindberg's handling of dialogue. The exchange of words between Julie and Jean is visceral and real; it loops back, shifts gears, charges ahead, retreats, engages, and withholds. The kinesthetic language transitions from love and passion to vitriol and disgust, and then back again; Evert Sprinchorn writes, "The bedrock of [Strindberg's] philosophy lay in the conviction that life was to be viewed less as a struggle against heredity and environment, as the naturalists insisted, than as a struggle of minds, each seeking to impose its will on other minds. Powerful minds were like charged particles attracting weaker particles, thus building up magnetic fields of influence."<sup>242</sup>

What makes the play so compelling is not so much its adherence to Darwinist formula or the Nietzschean spirit of drunken extravagance, but the undercurrent of sexual ambiguity and lust, the forces at work that overtake Jean and Julie, and the collapse of memory. The miasma that defines the characters is relative to their sense of the past; their memory is unreliable, manufactured, and manipulated in order to take advantage of the present. What is specific and revolutionary about Strindberg's plays, Freddie Rokem posits, "is not the omission of the past – which is frequently the case in absurdist drama – but rather a lack of certainty regarding the reliability of what the characters say about the past." Given the lack of verification "other than the private memory

of the character speaking, the past takes on a quite subjective quality. Julie gives her version of her past and Jean relates his, and the possible unreliability of these memories is confirmed when Jean changes his story of how he as a child watched her in the garden."<sup>243</sup>

The certainty of the past is no longer reliable given the psychic disruption of modernism. The memories of Jean and Julie are warped and manipulated by the changing landscape of their society – the whole hierarchy of relationships is upturned and dismantled. Servants talk to masters in ways unheard of before; masters devoid of money can no longer count on their lineage to court favors; and the swift exchange of money makes power more like a game of Monopoly than a traditional and rigid structure of leader and follower. Memory is no longer an agreed upon event or a formal and unified pattern, but a shifting perspective, dependent on each participant and often at odds with another observer. Kevin Newmark raises the point that “When the formal patterns of continuity that are presumed to have been grounded in traditional experience by the assimilation of consciousness to memory are disturbed by the truly alien experience of modernism, the coherence of subjective experience is itself displaced in an unexpected way. Consciousness and memory, whatever their relationship in some more or less mythic past, are no longer able to function as associative elements within the same system of individual and collective identity.”<sup>244</sup> Julie’s domination of Jean in the first half of the play is based on the formal continuity of master-servant; but when the threads of this relationship unravel, owing to their impulsive and probably violent sexual encounter – despite their occasional tenderness, I cannot imagine them having gentle sex – then with it unravels the whole edifice of aristocratic-peasant relationship. In its place emerges an egalitarian modernism (sex, as Stanley Kowalski will brutally assert decades later, is a great equalizer), based on business relationship (Jean’s dream of a hotel), property management, and Julie’s sense of broken equilibrium (her remarks about “falling”).

Yet, more than changing the stories or misrepresenting the past, the characters seize the moments of passion, lust, cravings, and disgust to manipulate each other in a fiercely sexual-power-mind game. The brutality of their language, the vicious give-and-take, and the willful struggle of minds in a give-no-quarter battle is ruthlessly fleshed out by the visceral and erotic dialogue. All that drives the two is the Schopenhauerian will, which is little more than a feedback loop of lust and disgust, sadomasochism, and magnets attracting and repelling. Strindberg is orchestrating volition which is nothing but what Charles Taylor calls “wild, blind, uncontrollable striving, never satisfied, incapable of satisfaction, driving us on, against all principles, laws, morality, all standards of dignity, to an insatiable search for the unattainable.” The will is its own worst enemy; once it attains its goal, it gives it up for another, and then another. “We love and we try to attain happiness, but sexual

desire is by its very nature incapable of bringing happiness. It is only another device of the will to perpetuate itself through us.”<sup>245</sup> Strindberg’s language is destructive and self-destructive; each character throws words like a dare; retorts provoke more rebuttals; and the sexual intoxication leads to bone-chilling venom. Yet, for all the vitriol, there is tenderness between them. The mysteriously fierce determination to dominate emanates from psyches hurled about in chaos; yet each sympathizes with the other because they share the same slippery slope of craving and nausea. Sexual stimulation excites more than lust; it unleashes every arousal – desire, hate, envy, compassion, greed, and sympathy. The play can be conceived entirely as fornication – throughout each moment the characters are making love with language by probing each other’s erotic zones, making words bump and grind, and trying new ways to satisfy. Their tactics are to enrage as foreplay, instigate teasing envy, and stimulate desire that aims to crack open each other’s bodies and skulls. The exchanges throughout the play are paradigmatic of the marital dramas by the well known authors of the twentieth century: Eugene O’Neill, John Osborne, Edward Albee, and Harold Pinter (to name just the more popular). Strindberg would also set the stage for the sexual sadism of Sarah Kane and other postmodernist authors who continue to see the unnerving conflict of the sexes blurred in a haze of lust and disgust. Arnold Weinstein asks “Who before Strindberg had grasped the incalculable *value* we derive from emotional and sexual warfare? Who before Strindberg realized that our true history is a history of virtuality, of ‘clashes by night’ that never make it into the history books, never even draw real blood?”<sup>246</sup> Weinstein overstates the case: Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*, Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, and Euripides’s *Medea*, to name but a few, illuminate the clash of sexual warfare prior to Strindberg. But Weinstein is spot on in suggesting that we revel in clashes that fail to make it to the history books, bloodless brawls that nevertheless scar our psyche, penetrating beneath the flesh to our sense of identity and core values.

### *The Dance of Death, Part 1*

A fortress tower looms over a remote island. In the background a single sentry marches back and forth across the stage. Guarding what? The remnants of aristocracy; the last vestiges of royalty; or perhaps a prison house, where a married couple, The Captain and Alice, fill out their endless days and nights fending off boredom, pottering around their eremitic island cell. We are entering a world familiar to Chekhov, only starker, harder edged, and a model for Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (O’Neill greatly admired Strindberg). *The Dance of Death* (1900) reveals the combustibility of a marriage where people must speak carefully in order to avoid the outbursts of anguish. The

Captain is the sharp-tongued curmudgeon of gloomy resignation, his wife a spiky amalgam of frustration and emasculation. *The Dance of Death* pulses with the baseline of regret, its throbbing awareness of late-middle-age adults who must live with the knowledge that every past choice has come back to haunt them. Once again Strindberg portrays an ex-military officer destined to live out his retirement seeking re-enactments of his old glory but who knows bitterly that the past might not be as glorious as he wishes, the present horrifyingly mundane, and the future one of endless sameness. A visitor comes, Alice's cousin Kurt, and the Captain lays bare Strindberg's Schopenhauer viewpoint.

CAPTAIN: It's perfectly gruesome. All life is Gruesome. Kurt, you believe in an after-life. Do you suppose we shall find peace – afterwards?

KURT: I suppose there'll be storms and strife there too.

CAPTAIN: There too. If there is any "there." Better if there is nothing.<sup>247</sup>

Everything is said and done with an air of long repetition, the absence of expectation of anything new or interesting to break the monotony. At one moment we think the Captain is dead, but he has only passed out. His heart is weak, his age is showing, but he marches on, in a fashion that Beckett will pick up a half century later. "Life is a circle," Alice says (72), and the Nietzschean axiom is played out in all of its synthetic pretense. The three main characters in this play (Part 1) seek liberation from the past that they can never attain; they are too set in their ways, too inured by life's disappointments. Captain: "This is it. The best life has to offer. Shit!" (83). F. L. Lucas observes that "Everything in this everlasting Hell is left at the end exactly as it was in the beginning. The captain's schemes have led to nothing – they were imaginary. His wife's denunciation of his embezzlement has led to nothing – his embezzlement was a fiction. Her attempts to seduce Kurt have led to nothing – it was a mere blaze of moldy straw. There seems nothing to prevent this precious pair from continuing to torment each other from their silver to their golden wedding."<sup>248</sup> Alice tries to persuade Kurt that her life's misery is due to the Captain's ego; he tries to do the same about her. With implacable ruthlessness they eviscerate each other's comfortable fantasies and daily illusions. In a speech that will inspire Edward Albee's character Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the termagant Alice says:

For this man no laws exist, no rules apply, no human authority matters. He stands above everything and everyone, the universe has been created for his private benefit, the sun and the moon are merely his messengers to carry orders to the stars. That's my husband! The insignificant captain who couldn't even become a major, whose puffed-up pride is a laughing-stock to those who he supposes fear

him – this coward who is afraid of the dark, and believes that all the discoveries of science are merely the build-up to his grand finale – a barrow load of manure, and that not of top quality (83).

Alice's bitchiness is much like Laura in *The Father*. Yet, if Strindberg's female characters were nothing more than noxious viragos his dramatic works would hardly endure. Alice, like Laura and Julie, is trapped in a social condition that offers little if any possibility. Alice is a former actress (as were several of Strindberg's wives) who wanted to rise about the pedestrian life and enter high society. She tells Kurt bitterly, "He promised me a good life, a beautiful home, and all I found was debts. The only gold I ever saw was on his uniform, and that wasn't real. He cheated me" (87).

Still, the waggish Alice is no better or worse than the sanctimonious Captain; they deserve each other. They invent theatrical games to entertain each other: vampirism, demonic passion, Alice as the "damsel in distress," the Captain as the "unappreciated genius" who thinks he is a bluebeard. Their hell is ritualized, re-enacted daily, and now especially for the amusement of Kurt (though Kurt, like the two young visitors in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, hardly understands it). Kurt says "I don't know where I am" (97), because in this Dante's *Inferno*-like world the performance of the married couple slips seamlessly from life to theatrics and back again (we are moving dramaturgically closer to Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*). Indeed, memory is a slippery device; Alice and the Captain remember the past differently, though each was present at the same event. If we are, as Freud might say, the sum total of our memories, Strindberg is moving in a direction that undermines memory as an objective resource of identity. We are only "how" we remember and not "what" we remember, because what we remember is selective and we only participate in a small portion of what transpired. Consequently, our present subjective template is all that we have, the only reliable source, and memory is on shaky ground, to say the least. As Benjamin Bennett explains, "in *The Dance of Death* the obscurity and uncertainty of the past is associated impressionistically with our understanding that the past is really nothing more than an idea that shapes itself differently in each person's mind; thus, even without knowing the past in detail, we still sense that the past is determining the present in a relatively logical manner (via people's evolving attitudes), just as we sense depth in an impressionist painting even without being able to compare exactly the scale of receding planes."<sup>249</sup> The murky images in Manet's painting emblemize the same fog of memory and temporal distortion in *The Dance of Death*. When Kurt asks Alice "What are you?," Alice replies: "An actress who isn't scared by your conventions, and is a woman!" (97). Indeed, she is what Strindberg is after: a conglomeration of past and present, a performer playing the role of vampire, seductress, and acting out an infidelity, but in the end plays out nothing real except her gender

and selective memory: no infidelity occurs, no statements made actually happen – she is what she says only to retreat back and establish herself as something else. She turns “speech-act” theory on its head (speech-act theory being the idea that if we say what we are, we become it, such as “I now pronounce you man and wife” and we therefore change). In Strindberg, as in Schopenhauer, nothing in our will changes anything; we spin our wheels in a dumb show that takes us back to where we began. The Captain ends the play saying “Blot out the past and go on living. Well. Let’s go on” (111). We go on, Beckett-like, enacting the rituals that define existence, trapped in an existential spiral, too *fainéant* to change, pule over our condition yet doomed to repeat the same mistakes and fall into the same situations. We blot out the past, only to find it again, like a bad penny, only grimmer.

### Strindberg’s Transition

Richard Gilman (quoting Evert Sprinchorn) remarked that “it is almost a banality of modern criticism” to call Strindberg’s transition from naturalism to expressionism, especially in his plays *To Damascus* and *A Dream Play*, “one of the starting points and origins of the most interesting works of twentieth-century theatre.”<sup>250</sup> After a six year hiatus, Strindberg emerged from his mental “retreat” (1894–1897) ready to recommence playwriting. Strindberg’s “transition” from naturalism during the pre-Inferno period to post-Inferno symbolism and expressionism is often a way of categorizing his artistic output. While useful, this arrangement avoids the technical connection with his objective realism and internal subjectivity. Eszter Szalczer concurs, noting that “the mainly realistic dramaturgy of the early plays exploring contemporary social and psychological issues” contrasts with “the revolutionary expressionistic techniques of the later plays grappling with metaphysical and existential themes,” but “to appreciate Strindberg as first and foremost as a modern playwright, it is important to recognize some vital continuities in his work.”<sup>251</sup> His early naturalistic emphasis on the character’s fragile delusions, dissolving identities, and enveloping paranoia translates into the illusions, disorientation, illogicalities, random connections, masquerades, and dreams projected from a single psychic consciousness in his later works. For all his emphasis on symbolism and expressionism – the turn-of-the-century modernist movement that sought to replace naturalism with fantasy, dream, and psychic disturbance – Strindberg’s plays took in existential matters such as birth, love, loss, emotional turmoil, the search for one’s identity, and the inevitable decline into death that he had explored before. In these new plays Strindberg struggled to render his own emotional and psychological traumas, particularly his “nervous breakdown,” as well as his doomed marital relationships, into his theatrical setting. Strindberg

follows the Romantics in his quest for inner sensibility, but he goes further, finding that what is within is timeless, mythic, and archetypal – and always subjective. He understands that our grasp of the interiority can only be personal and the road to collective memory must pass through the heightened awareness of personal experience. Within his own subjectively heightened ego, his range of self-portraits in the plays variously depict protagonists as searching yet skeptical youth, dandy, dejected lover, denizen of hell, Jesus imagery on the cross, and a restless wanderer epitomizing the modern *flâneur*.

Influenced by the symbolist Maeterlinck, the mystic Swedenborg, as well as occultism, alchemy, photography, science, and politics, Strindberg revolutionized dramatic form. His inward turn represented a quest for a new creativity, but it also reflected his pursuit of a different kind of reality. There was a strange, psychic world awaiting him, a terra incognita where the disorientation of the senses opens up a labyrinth of subconscious nooks and crannies. In his expressionistic plays we find an enunciation of images that subvert the fundamental unity of the subject and its coherence as a single object, resulting in new forms and methods that can adequately describe this internal plundering. Like Cubism, Strindberg explored spatial fragments in the psyche, shards of memory, and creative combination of images. The concept of time in his dramas also takes a decided turn. Strindberg withdrew from the notion of time as linear and historical; the clock may move in a straight line, but human psychology moves circularly, repeating itself in a feedback loop. John Peter posits that for Schopenhauer, “time is only a form in which we comprehend matter: it has nothing to do with the essence of life. Time is like an unceasing stream; and when we talk about the ‘present,’ we mean that we have found a way of isolating and understanding things which would otherwise merge into the flux of time.”<sup>252</sup> Time, as a measure of who we are, is meaningless; the past is uncertain, subject to distortion by unreliable and manipulative memory. History, then, is suspect, because history depends on memory, on recorded data at the mercy of subjective influences. For Strindberg, events are recalled in present consciousness and future longing that has filtered and polluted the certainty and actuality of what had occurred.

The emphasis on temporal causality in realistic drama suggests that actions are guided by human will, and that this volition moves the narrative towards a meaningful trajectory. This Aristotelian scaffolding, for Strindberg, is disingenuous; it tells us what we would like to think of as life’s processes by reassuring us of human progress, enjoying the satisfaction that something has been accomplished and we are now headed to a new and better goal. That is often melodrama’s promise: that whatever hardship we endured a better life will result from our suffering. Strindberg wanted instead to create dramas that told a different story, one closer to the truthful chaos of life’s uncertainty. He wanted drama to incorporate dreams, fantasies, and illusions that are not

parallel universes to actuality but actually integrated into concrete existence. To assert this, modern drama had to make a clean break from the forms of the past that depended on history, progress, and linearity. Strindberg wanted drama to experience time in the immediate present – not as something passing from one event to another, but rather, as Antonin Artaud would advocate several decades later, as a pure presence and visceral immediacy. Nietzsche, whose influence on this new form of drama cannot be overestimated, makes it clear in this passage:

Consider the cattle, grazing as they pass you by: they do not know what is meant by yesterday or today, they leap about, eat, rest, digest, leap about again, and so from morn till night and from day to day, fettered to the moment and its pleasure or displeasure, and thus neither melancholy nor bored. This is a hard sight for man to see; for, though he thinks himself better than the animals because he is human, he cannot help envying them their happiness. [...] But he also wonders at himself, that he cannot learn to forget but clings relentlessly to the past: however far and fast he may run, this chain runs with him. [...] A leaf flutters from the scroll of time, floats away – and suddenly floats back again and falls into the man's lap. Then the man says "I remember" and envies the animal, who at once forgets and for whom every moment really dies, sinks back into night and fog and is extinguished forever.<sup>253</sup>

The idea is to find a way to achieve the "pure present" achieved by animals. Modernism's pure present, writes Paul de Man, "exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure."<sup>254</sup> For Strindberg, the idea of a pure presence on stage requires a spontaneity reflective of human thought patterns (or, at least his thought patterns). His goal was to loosen the threads of reality and show it in a state of ferment, germination, and exposure. Arnold Weinstein writes that in the "great late plays, *To Damascus* and *A Dream Play*, each display a virtually Cubist rendition of time, juxtaposing separate events, creating its own weave. Strindberg's chronicle of evolving/returning/altering beliefs and deceptions" is "both personal and emblematic, mirroring the feverish quest for 'master plans' that marks the late nineteenth century."<sup>255</sup>

Strindberg launched his artistic skills against mimesis, what the Greeks meant by copying, imitating, reconstructing, and representing. He wanted to get out from under realism and offer a new way of perceiving drama, one that had its own distantiated logic of free association, immediate reaction, and metamorphic spontaneity. The crisis of representation Strindberg embarked on is nothing less than the establishment of an avant-garde modernism replete with symbols, myths, dreams, subconscious, the fabric of the word, the granularity of poetic language, and the instability of time and space. The transition from



Impressionism to Cubism can be said to occur with Strindberg; moving from the hazy imagery of Impressionism and its effort to find new perspective and angles on “what” is being represented, to the Cubists, following Relativity Theory, refocusing attention away from the nature of reality and toward the nature of measurement, observation, and “how” events are represented. Clement Greenberg contends that “the Cubists brought to a culmination what the Impressionists, when they let forms emerge as clots of color touches from an ambiance of color touches, had begun: the old distinction between object-in-front-of-background and background-behind-and-around-object was obliterated – obliterated at least as something felt rather than merely read.”<sup>256</sup> Similarly with drama, the fixed perspective of character in juxtaposition to a backdrop resembling reality was obliterated by Strindberg; instead the relationship of subject and background detaches, time and place are everywhere and nowhere, and existence is destabilized.

However, Strindberg knew that the presence of the actor onstage is always present in time and space; even in the most abstract, experimental drama still has to contend with the actor in space and moving through time. However much Strindberg moved towards a deconstruction of the hierarchy of reality – surface mimetic representation on top, subconscious motivation on the bottom, and attempting to demonstrate fragments, scraps, and bits of reality – he knew a level of axiological homogeneity connected to history and certainty was inevitable by the fact of the actor as a real presence and not as an abstraction (by contrast, puppet theatre can do more with abstraction). Strindberg’s biographer Olof Lagercrantz makes this important point: “The strength of Strindberg’s plays lies in their emphatic simplicity. The actress Aino Taube once said that there was always a connection between ‘head and guts’ in everything Strindberg wrote, which made it easy to familiarize oneself with his roles. What his characters say echoes through their whole being: it does not merely appear in comic strip balloons above their heads, as in the case with many other playwrights.”<sup>257</sup>

In an effort to reconcile drama to modernism’s new emphasis on abstraction, Strindberg refocuses attention on a new value of modernism, what Thomas Vargish and Delo Mook call “epistemic trauma,” which is “a kind of primary or initial difficulty, strangeness, opacity; a violation of common sense, of our laboriously achieved intuitions of reality; an immediate, counter-intuitive refusal to provide the reassuring conclusiveness of the past.”<sup>258</sup> Strindberg employs epistemic trauma as well as Relativity Theory (though Einstein was still three years away from writing it) when he notes in 1902 that his characters “split, double, multiply, evaporate, condense, disperse, converge.” Like atoms, characters careen against each other and internally, break apart at the slightest collision, and reform. The author’s notes to *A Dream Play* also signify a new centrality of the protagonist, the “one consciousness [holding] sway over them

all, that of the dreamer; for him there are no secrets, no incongruities, no scruples, no law.”<sup>259</sup> The chaos and controlled anarchy creates for Strindberg an alienating effect (an idea that will predominate twentieth-century modern drama) – a retreat from the sensible towards the nonsensical, and follows the rules of Relativity which alter the fundamental constituents of space (images) and time (narrative). Strindberg initiates modernism’s attempt to disrupt and subvert our seeming security of time and space. Time and space are no longer homogeneous because their measurements require the physical presence of the observer. By distorting the narrative equilibrium and introducing knots and loops of time and space that disrupt the train of events, he decomposes the unity of reality and challenges the ontological evidence of “character.” Strindberg, or his surrogate protagonists, is the central beam of light, the singular identity, from which all events circulate. He now viewed the world from an anatomical relationship of cascading characters careening and marooned in their subjectivity and seeking ways to connect.

### *To Damascus*

Strindberg’s *To Damascus* (*Till Damaskus*, inappropriately translated as *The Road to Damascus* 1898–1901) was written in three parts. The first two were composed in Paris in 1898, and the third (rarely performed) in Stockholm in 1901. Strindberg emerged from his experience in a sanatorium (1895–1896) having endured mental as well as physical anguish (he severely burned his hands in a chemical experiment). He additionally suffered from poverty, debt, and a messy second divorce. The legal imbroglio, as well as hallucinations, extreme psychotic episodes, and pressures from failures, induced a collapse. By 1898, however, he had recovered and though still suffering from bouts of depression, *To Damascus*, a biography of sorts, seemed to inspire a renewed creativity.

The play begins on a street. The Stranger (the Unknown One in the original) meets Lady. Notice the immediate change in tone; the demonstrations of vulnerability; the specter of death (a funeral march with music has just passed); and his trademark no-holds-barred sexual conflagration is decidedly softened.

STRANGER: So there you are. I thought you would come.

LADY: You called me, then? Yes, I felt it. But why do you stand here, on the street corner?

STRANGER: I don’t know. I must stand somewhere while I wait.

LADY: What are you waiting for?

STRANGER: If I only knew. For forty years I have been waiting for something. I believe it is called happiness; it may just be the end of sorrow. Listen to the dreadful music again. Listen! Don’t go, please don’t go. I shall be frightened if you go.<sup>260</sup>

The play is notable for its circular construction – everything seems to repeat itself, doubling back to where it began. Strindberg, greatly influenced by Kierkegaard's conception of repetition, describes this process in a letter of 17 March 1898. *To Damascus*, he says, "is certainly fiction but with a terrifying half-reality behind it. The art lies in the composition which symbolizes 'The Repetition' [*Gjentagelsen*]" Kierkegaard speaks of: the action unrolls forwards to the Asylum; there it kicks against the pricks and rebounds back through the pilgrimage, the relearning, the eating of one's words, until it begins anew at the same spot where the action had stopped, and where it began. You may notice how the setting unravels backwards from the Asylum, which is the spine of the book that shuts upon itself and encloses the action. Or like a snake that bites his own tail."<sup>261</sup> Life is an illusion, a false depiction of happiness that disappoints. In his introduction to the play, Gunnar Ollén writes that the Stranger "is an author, like Strindberg," whose "childhood of hate is Strindberg's own." The Stranger's "refusal to attend his father's funeral, that the Parish Council has wanted to take his child away from him, that on account of his writings he has suffered lawsuits, illness, poverty, exile, divorce; that in the police description he is characterized as a person without a permanent situation, with uncertain income; married, but has deserted his wife and left his children" and that "he gives the impression of not being in full possession of his senses," yield "to the experiences of the unfortunate Strindberg himself, with all his bitter defeats in life and triumphs in the world of letters."<sup>262</sup> In addition there is mysticism and religion; the entrance of the beggar (a mainstay of expressionism); and the establishment of stations, or places, such as a street corner, hotel room, highway, gorge, etc., that distort space and expand the play's imagination (also an expressionist device). All of the characters and spaces are seen through the eyes of the protagonist, the Stranger. This personalization is built on the expressionist concept of what Carl Dahlström calls the "*Ausstrahhungen des Ichs* – the radiation, expansion and unfolding of the ego." Rather than a stream of consciousness, which tends to itemize the elements of the consciousness, draw from psychology, and produce "countless items of similar or dissimilar patterns," the Expressionist theme yields instead "a unifying instrument that moulds oneness of the countless items poured into it." The ego is, according to Dahlström, "a magic crystal in which the absolute is in constant play. It is the subject that registers the everlasting state of becoming that qualifies our world; and this subject has an anti-pole object which is functional only in giving meaning to the subject. It is this ego, this subject, this magic crystal that actually gathers reality in its ultimate character."<sup>263</sup> The perception consists of taking into consideration the role of the narrator as a kind of clearing house where all temporal and spatial differentiations are "created" from his or her position. The narrative anticipates Proust's "remembrance of things past," which attempts to resolve the enigma

of the past and its relation to the problems of the present, identity, duration, history, and memory. Strindberg partakes in a dramatic experiment consisting of what H. Meyerhoff calls “the quest for disclosing some sense of continuity, identity, and unity within the context of the personal past of the individual.”<sup>264</sup> Strindberg is trying to convey the experience of an interior mind at work and put it onstage. Eszter Szalczzer’s study of the relationship between Strindberg’s dramas and photography illuminates this effort through Strindberg’s emphasis on vision; by the 1890s, Szalczzer contends, Strindberg became “obsessed with the search for techniques by which to discern invisible realms behind visible surfaces.” His dramas reveal a “radical departure from the naturalistic aesthetics according to which photographic exactitude increases an artwork’s ability to convey the truth of an observable reality.” Instead of mimetic replica, Strindberg “blurs the contours of the observing self until it extended to encompass all. Reality is instantly subjectified as a mere projection of the self, and it appears to be consisting of purely cerebral phenomena.”<sup>265</sup>

Throughout the play there are, like music, reoccurring motifs. This *déjà vu* creates the experience of life: we think this way; we’ve been here before; we recognize patterns in our relationships. This is particularly true in the way Strindberg compresses his own two marriages into one (first and second). Habit conflicts with guilt; efforts to extricate ourselves from situations have varying degrees of success. We move haltingly, still attached, yet disengaging from relationships. We confuse one person with another; we blur together two or more important people in our memories. The references of the Doctor as the Werewolf are vague, but this is what an imagination – especially one as vivid as Strindberg’s – can create. We have our own secret codes for people, our own nicknames that we use that don’t always depend on common sense. The external parts of the play – plot and character – are subject to the Stranger’s neurosis. Strindberg was interested in the concept of what was called Tragic Titanism, the idea that there are people above the petty fray of the bourgeoisie. The Stranger is a Faustian figure, searching for knowledge, crushed by the weight of his guilt, and shares the mark of Cain with the Beggar, the scar on the forehead. Compare the two scenes: the Stranger discovers love in its tenderness, only to be brought back down low in his conversation with his mother by a looming existential senselessness. Stranger:

Perhaps that’s why I find such contentment with you. I found you complete. I can’t imagine life without you. The clouds have gone, the sky is blue, the breeze warm – feel how it strokes your face. This is life; yes, now I am alive, just now! I feel myself swell and stretch, rarefy, become boundless; I am everywhere, in the sea which is my blood, in the mountains which is my skeleton, in the trees, in the flowers. And my head reaches to heaven. I look out over the Universe which is I, I feel the strength of the Creator within me, for I am the Creator (222–3).

Note, however, this change in tone:

- MOTHER: Have you also realized that neither you nor any other human being controls your curious destiny?
- STRANGER: I – I think I did realize that.
- MOTHER: Then you've got somewhere.
- STRANGER: But there's something else. I'm – bankrupt. I've lost the power to create. And I can't sleep at night –
- MOTHER: Oh?
- STRANGER: What people call – nightmares. And the worst is, I no longer dare to die, because I'm no longer sure that death puts an end to misery.
- MOTHER: I see.
- STRANGER: But the worst thing of all is that I've developed such a loathing for myself that I'd gladly get rid of that self, but I can't see any possibility of doing so (254).

In the realistic plays of the nineteenth century up through today we generally have a sense of trust in the narrator. It is, after all, the narrator's voice or perception that provides perspective. Realistic drama suggests that we accept that the author conveys events in such a way that the audience can see them along parallel lines. The objective narrative can demonstrate a range of perspectives and even the Impressionistic play can distend and distort reality. Still, we accept an act of faith between playwright and audience. We recognize immediately time and place; characters remain consistent (even if they discover and change); time and place are understood to be within the limits of human perception and measurement; and context is always relatable to objective events in life. Strindberg will have none of this; the perspectives and certainties are no longer describing realities because Strindberg has set up a barrier between audience and protagonist. We are made aware of his presence, and his presence is untrustworthy. With Strindberg, our sense of "character" osculates, dissolves, re-appears, and morphs into beings and shapes that have no consistency, no certainty of place, and no trajectory of time. The two speeches above provide a small sample of the uncertainty of just who the "Stranger" is. He is "Unknown" and that un-canniness is as it should be.

### *A Dream Play*

Frederick Karl notes that "Modernism has the quality of dream because of its disruption of linear and sequential narrative, its blending of sensory experiences, its addition of color to what was once black and white, its tampering with temporal and spatial expectations. There was displacement and condensation, distortion and exaggeration, even within minimalism."<sup>266</sup> In *A Dream Play*

(1901) Strindberg attempts to recreate the quality of a dream, with its impressionistic overview, jump cuts, random turns, arrival of characters unannounced, and repetitive motifs. It is as if Strindberg anticipates Beckett, who wrote of Marcel Proust that "There is no great difference, says Proust, between the memory of a dream and the memory of reality."<sup>267</sup> The play marks the arrival of dramatic expressionism, though Strindberg died in 1912, the year that experienced the official birth of expressionism in art. In the following year the movement made itself known when the infamous Armory Show opened in New York. This exhibition brought European modern art to America, scandalizing viewers with the works of Marcel Duchamp, Wassily Kandinsky, and Strindberg's friend Edvard Munch.

In *A Dream Play* Strindberg abandons the constraints of time, place, and character. Instead of spatial and temporal certainty, he creates a multi-colored haze through which the audience experiences the shifting, sparkling landscape of dreams. Indra's daughter descends to earth and the play's actions deal with her experiences there: as the glazier's daughter, as an opera door-keeper, and as the lawyer's wife. She finds it difficult to breathe and repeats the phrase "It's pitiable to be a human." She has lost her way, sinking deeper into what Evert Sprinchorn calls "the slough of human existence."<sup>268</sup> The play contains essentially three themes: people are to be pitied; love might provide a salvation; and the secrets of the universe, if they can be found, are revealed behind closed doors (this last point echoes a dream). The play takes on a symphonic form, something Joyce does with the novel *Ulysses*. Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* is anticipated: reprehensible thoughts slip into consciousness; woman ascends, shaking clay from her feet; and man becomes a poet. All these detached entities plunge us into an unstable world, with no exposition or even explanation, and proceed against logic. We have little reference to the real world, though it does reflect Strindberg's life. The play had three different working titles: *Prisoners*, *The Corridor Drama*, and *The Growing Castle*. Is this meant to be a vaudeville? A patchwork quilt? A variety show? Farce and song? A fairy tale? Alice in Wonderland? Strindberg, Freddie Rokem contends, "has elaborated a dynamic dramatic/theatrical method of presentation through which he shows us the heroes and their functional world from several constantly changing points of view during the process of the action, as if he was mediating or presenting what we see through a camera."<sup>269</sup>

Like Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Strindberg creates magic by emphasizing the overwhelming and transcendent power of spectacle. In the "Preface" to *A Dream Play* he writes, "In this dream play, the author has, as in his former dream play, *To Damascus*, attempted to imitate the inconsequent yet transparently logical shape of a dream. Everything can happen, everything is possible and probable. Time and place do not exist; on an insignificant basis of reality, the imagination spins, weaving new patterns; a mixture of memories,

experiences, free fancies, incongruities and improvisations.”<sup>270</sup> Stephen Kern correctly asserts that “Strindberg somewhat overstates the accomplishment of the staging, because time and space did not altogether cease to exist.” Still, Strindberg managed to jettison the uniform framework of narrative development and spatial logic, and in this “Strindberg’s statement of purpose echoed the account of the ‘primary process’ of dream work that Freud presented in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published just one year earlier. These two pivotal works from widely differing fields showed that the processes of mental life cannot be enclosed in the rigid conceptual framework of traditional psychology nor dramatized convincingly within rigid unities of traditional theater.”<sup>271</sup>

The sheer number of settings in *A Dream Play* dazzles the eye. Strindberg records the many transformations through a plethora of places and even recommends that scene changes are “done in full view of the audience” (200), something Brecht would later put to use. This varying perspectival design is observed by Walter Benjamin several decades later. For Benjamin, the experience of the boulevard, observing children’s books, unpacking a library, dining, and untold other elements of modern life emerge as objects of critical scrutiny and manifold associations. Each item takes on allegorical significance; the macrocosm is a product of the microcosm; yet each unique object is not absorbed into the whole but remains truly unique. Terry Eagleton’s summation of Benjamin fits well into Strindberg’s multiplicity: “The thing must not be grasped as a mere instantiation of some universal essence, instead, thought must deploy a whole cluster of stubbornly specific concepts which in Cubist style refract the object in myriad directions or penetrate it from a range of diffuse angles. In this way, the phenomenal sphere is itself persuaded to yield up a kind of noumenal truth, as the microscope gaze estranges the everyday into the remarkable.”<sup>272</sup>

Strindberg’s language takes on a visceral, disjointed power. Every line is an exclamation, an explosion from within a soul on fire. Jean and Julie’s savage rants form the beginning of this style, and by the time of *A Dream Play* Strindberg plays with the euphonious and dissonant sounds of “sword thrusts” and “pin pricks” to create a theatrical impact. Indra’s descent into Earth is punctuated by voices. The verbal act most closely identified with expressionism was the scream. Edvard Munch’s painting of *The Scream* created an icon for this harrowing image of the suffering soul and the cry (*Schrei*) soon became the emblem of expressionist drama. In Strindberg’s plays, the characters emote a fiery eloquence hovering in and over the language. It is the extreme expression of subjectivism, which, writes L. E. Cahoon, “is like an old and deep-rooted oak penetrating deep into the soil of modern thought, an oak whose branches many critics correctly attack while failing to grasp the trunk and the roots.”<sup>273</sup> Avoiding the Freudian consciousness and emphasizing instead the phenomena – analyzing the event itself – Jacques Lacan suggests that in dream analysis the

point is “to overcome that which floats everywhere, that which marks, stains, spots the text of any dream interpretation – *I am not sure, I doubt.*”<sup>274</sup> Dreams, along Lacanian lines, are not funny; even when they are pleasant, they have little sense of humor. This is likely because we doubt, as Lacan says, and we are always at the center of dreams, whereas comedy requires a certain distance. We may awaken from a dream, redeploy, and in objectifying the story find its humor, but that is because we have recovered some distance from it. So it is with Strindberg: he writes as if he has just awakened and finds humor in the dream. In the following passage, the Kierkegaardian concept of repetition and time is mocked; the school teacher is the pedant (not unlike Tesman in *Hedda Gabler*) instructing a group of school children; and among them is an uncomfortable Officer. The mish-mash is meant to reflect a dream, but also to satirize:

- OFFICER: But how long must I sit here, then?  
 SCHOOLMASTER: How long here? Do you think that time and space exist? Suppose that time exists, then you must be able to say what time is. What is time?  
 OFFICER: Time (*Thinks*). That I can't say, but I know what it is; therefore I can know how much two times two is without being able to say it. Can you tell me what time is?  
 SCHOOLMASTER: Of course I can.  
 OFFICER: (*and all the class*). Say, then.  
 SCHOOLMASTER: Time. Let me see (*Stands motionless with his finger to his nose*). While we talk, time runs. So, time is something that runs while I talk (224).

Dreams serve to open the emotional valves, to let emotions flow freely, and the Daughter calls it accordingly: “Thus it is that the world, life, and mankind are but a phantom, an illusion, a dream vision” (250). And the Poet responds: “My dream!” (251). Strindberg attempts to have the audience identify with the dreamer by creating a disjointed journey or pilgrimage in the unfolding of dramatic events. He does this by utilizing one of the most mysterious properties of dreams: the dual feeling that we are both the authors of the dream but also the audience. We experience our dreams as if they were not of our making, not products of our imagination but something given to us, something we seem to be receiving from elsewhere (this is why religions often see dreams as signs). This duality, unlike a subjective-objective dualism, leads us to the modernist idea of the interpretation of dreams: they are reflective of what we were and also tell us something we need to decipher. We are caught up in a succession of images that happen to be in our own head but can appear to be more real than reality; dreams are simultaneously self-centered and other-worldly. Kafka's memorable and unsettling opening lines concern dreams and capture the essential Strindbergian message: “When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin.”<sup>275</sup>



Strindberg's dream zooms in and out, like a lens shifting from wide angle to telescopic. Things appear important only to become unimportant; events weave in and out, things (fishnets, telephones) appear and disappear. "Day and night. Day and night," says Indra's Daughter. "A Merciful Providence wishes to shorten your waiting; so the days flee the pursuing nights" (197). It is obvious to point out the direct line from Strindberg to Beckett, but it would be remiss not to call these two the bookends of modern drama: Strindberg the inaugurator and Beckett the final act. As the Advocate warns the Daughter, "You haven't experienced the worst thing."

DAUGHTER: What can that be?

ADVOCATE: Repetition. Repeating the pattern. Go back! Learn your lesson again. Come (228).

### *The Ghost Sonata*

In a diary notation of 3 September 1903, Strindberg scathingly wrote: "Life is so abominably ugly, we humans so abysmally evil, that if a writer were to describe *everything* he has seen or heard, no one could bear to read it. There are things I remember seeing and hearing, in the company of good, respectable popular people, that I have deleted, have never been able to discuss and do not want to remember. Education and culture seem like mere masks worn by the beast, and virtue merely dissimulation. Our highest achievement is to conceal vileness. Life is so cynical that only a swine can feel comfortable in it. And whoever is able to see this ugly life as beautiful *is* a swine! Life is certainly a punishment! A hell; for some, a purgatory, but a paradise for no one."<sup>276</sup> Despite this ghoulishness, *A Ghost Sonata* (or *A Spook Sonata*, 1907), the third of a four-part drama called the Chamber Plays, contains some spiritual hope and there is, as we shall see, some humor. It trades on symbolism; by virtue of the reoccurrence of symbols, the drama takes on the appearance of a musical composition. "Instead of causes," notes Evert Sprinchorn, the playwright "saw correspondences," because "Strindberg tended to view the inner life as more real than the outer life."<sup>277</sup> Captivated by music, Strindberg received inspiration for *The Ghost Sonata* from Beethoven's "Ghost Trio," N. 5 in D, Opus 70, No.1. The tonality of the play can be understood as the soul's passage from death to spiritual enlightenment. The structure builds on themes drawn from Indian mysticism, Wagner's Valkyrie, and love. On the street outside the apartment, we are confronted with the first theme, the Student's love for the Daughter and Hummel's withered engagement to the now ancient women in the next house. We also see the Milkmaid, with whom the Student communicates fluidly while Hummel adamantly refuses to see her.

The Student, like the Stranger in *To Damascus*, is the Strindberg surrogate. One of the subjects of this play, Freddie Rokem reminds us, is death in the context of the bourgeois household: "Hypocrisy and deception reside behind the walls of the modern well-to-do bourgeois house presented in the first act of the play. As the lies are gradually exposed, they threaten to shatter the very foundations not only of the house but of society and the whole social order as well. The play's revolutionary message has, however, been immersed in an atmosphere of resignation and religious sentiments so that when *The Ghost Sonata* ends, the only future that seems to remain is one of eternal death."<sup>278</sup> Yet, for all its bleakness, *The Ghost Sonata* contains gallows humor. An uptight Mummy locks himself in a cupboard; a pompous Colonel dispenses wisdom that goes nowhere; a curmudgeon makes eyes at the Milkmaid; and the absurdity of the situations take on a vaudevillian tone. There is Strindberg's trademark notion of vampirism, but it seems so (dare I say) toothless. *The Ghost Sonata's* kaleidoscopic sensibility embraces music in an opera-like fashion, a love story with balletic feats of physical comedy, in which the pristine setting is reduced to ludic disorder and mayhem; and Strindberg presents a perceptive reflection on our need for order in life and its painful conflict with the chaos of real passions and messy circumstances.

Eugene O'Neill called Strindberg "the precursor of all modernity in our present theatre," and said he "remains among the most modern of moderns, the greatest interpreter in the theatre of the characteristic spiritual conflicts which constitute the drama – the blood! – of our lives today."<sup>279</sup> In many ways Strindberg anticipates postmodernism in his emphasis on hybrid identities, mimicry in self-formation, and ambivalence towards ideas. But unlike postmodernism, he never avoids contending with pressing circumstances like the voraciousness of twentieth-century industrialism. Far from floating free in a state of un-belonging characteristic of postmodernism, Strindberg recognizes that most people are trapped in predetermined social and political positions and must act accordingly. For him the possession of multiple selves is not, as the postmodernists would have it, a positive thing: though multiple selves produces the virtues of suavity and wit, they also produce a trauma Strindberg never lets us forget.

# Chapter 4

## Aboulia

Maxim Gorky said that in the presence of Anton Chekhov (1860–1904), “everybody unwittingly felt an inner longing to be simpler, more truthful, to be more himself.”<sup>280</sup> Chekhov avoids broad brushstrokes, grandiose themes, or political overtones. His characters live fully, each in his or her own solipsistic peculiarity. Whereas most playwrights are present in their dramas – you can sense, even subtly, whose side they favor or what views they share – discerning Chekhov’s subjectivity is more complicated. Chekhov does not set himself up as supreme judge of his characters; rather, he lets their world appear in its fearsome ambiguity. Any single, subjective truth dissolves into a myriad of relative truths parceled out by relationships. We often desire a world stage where good and evil can be clearly distinguished because we have an innate desire to judge before we understand. Chekhov instead brings together people whose orbits clash, evade, and collide – characters retreating to neutral corners only to reengage within life’s familial and conjugal. In every play glimmering aperçus of witty human truths surface, but without ostentation; they are, rather, concise Proustian observations that recall familiar experiences or thoughts with the undercurrent of wisdom. Maurice Valency remarks that “Chekhov’s characters are never wholly detached from the matrix” but they are also not completely connected to it, either. This is because, as Valency notes, “death was so near to him, he had no strong terminal sense. Man ends; but his story is endless.” Chekhov’s plays, therefore, are unfinished: “When the curtain has fallen, the play goes on; there is still the sense of flux.”<sup>281</sup> Aristotle, whose ideas of drama have informed dramaturgy for centuries, makes the case that dramas end when happiness or un-happiness is achieved. Happiness (*eudeimonia*), he says, “is that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing”; it is “something final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action.” Happiness

is neither a bodily sensation, perception, nor an inner virtue; rather it is an activity, like good music-making, and in this, he says, “human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue.”<sup>282</sup> For Chekhov, modernism is too fragmented to make happiness an illuminating through-line of “activity”; it is therefore impossible to commit to action as nourishment for happiness. His characters raise the specter of work, effort, and commitment – “activities” in an Aristotelian sense – but each time they commit they find the results unsatisfactory and disappointing.

Chekhov’s characters suffer from *aboulia* – the loss or impairment of the ability to act or to make decisions. They are caught between two conflicting drives: polarized by their provincialism and parochial environment, they long to escape the loneliness and entropy of rural life and break through to the modernist (frequently urban) world; yet they cling tenaciously to an unsustainable past. They are outsiders longing for fashion and current trends; yet their modesty and self-effacement prevent them from aggressively pursuing their dreams. His four major dramas – *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard* – are the benchmark of modern realism, yet all four stand at the edges of realism, extending towards symbolism and to theatre that shuns political involvement while simultaneously encapsulating the very politics of its time. The plots are immaterial – the frequent criticism of Chekhov is that “nothing happens” in his plays – yet everything that surrounds his characters has seismic consequences: people move away, land is sold, the truth is exposed, affairs come and go, and relationships arise and dissolve. Chekhov’s modernism deprives audiences of the comfort of a traditionally determined forward momentum; instead, something is given or presented, then taken away, allowing audiences to track back and forth between engagement and disengagement. In his four major plays urban sophisticates arrive in the provinces and then depart, leaving the residents to face a lifetime of wintry desolation, yet these “plot” descriptions hardly capture the complexity of his dramas. Early on he expressed his idea about drama in a letter of 1888: “On stage everything should be just as complicated and just as simple as in life. People eat their meals, and in the meantime their fortune is made or their life ruined.”<sup>283</sup>

The space between characters is tightened and loosened; friendships form, family loyalties are challenged, and erotic connections ebb and flow in the rhythms of life. For Chekhov, the drama is what takes place between events (shootings, sale of orchards, affairs, etc); what we see is the before and after, the traumatizing effect the events have on people. His characters’ ambivalence and inertia are a well-known and essential aspect of his dramaturgy, and his theme of people coming together and drifting apart is the concise expression of anxieties amidst the encroaching modern world. Few playwrights can master simultaneously delicacy and vaudeville, the nuanced tipping point of what is funny and sad, as gracefully as Chekhov. To call Chekhov a comic, tragic, or

tragicomic playwright is to do him a disservice, because such categorizations limit him to pre-modern genres that too neatly and formulaically explain his complexity.<sup>284</sup> His characters exhibit a lost meaningfulness that gives them a compelling mix of mordancy and ruefulness: they are clever, but hardly a match for Shaw or Wilde; they are taciturn, but not to the degree of Strindberg or Ibsen; they are humorous, but not the same ribaldry of Noel Coward or Neil Simon; and they are tragic, but nowhere near the magnitude of O'Neill or Miller. His plays evince the Hamlet-like behavior of those thwarting their own desires, stifling their own needs, and subduing their own passions. It is the antithesis of Aristotelian drama, which depends on action; whether trivialized in melodrama, impassioned in tragedy, or clumsy in comedy, action had been the staple of drama. Chekhov modernizes all this: he mixes the romantic notion of subjectivity with Olympian detachment and assiduous indirectness; his characters are at once spokespersons for their subjective desires yet moved about on a chess-board of other desires that misdirect and divert their attention. Chekhov avoids the complete subjectivism found in Strindberg's expressionism or other forms of symbolism, which has the liability of collapsing into extremities detached from reality; or the fierce dialectical struggles of Ibsen. Instead, he finds a way of being subjective and objective simultaneously, by using sensibility, mood, and subtle interactive relationships, respectful of characters' ordinariness and flaws, and admiring their endurance in spite of, or because of, their shortcomings.

In Chekhov's plays, mundane exchanges are deceptive. Their power is cumulative; by the end of his plays the human condition is revealed, conceded, and comprehended, leaving a trail of remorse, humor, and pity. Chekhov's characters are "funny and sad at the same time," Vladimir Nabokov says, "but you would not see the sadness if you did not see their fun, because both were linked up." Chekhov kept this juggling act of sadness and humor alive, Nabokov explains, through language, "by keeping all his words in the same dim light and of the same exact tint of gray, a tint between the color of an old fence and that of a low cloud. The variety of his moods, the flicker of his charming wit, the deeply artistic economy of his characterization, the vivid detail, and the fade-out of human life – all the peculiar Chekhovian features – are enhanced by being suffused and surrounded by a faintly iridescent verbal haziness."<sup>285</sup> His characters pursue dreams that even they admit to vaguely and often inarticulately; they long for something ambiguous and unattainable, because they are amidst a transitional society – moving from old world to new world values – making them uncertain about old and new articles of faith, codes of manners, and social comportment. They are battered by the traumas of living in a transitory age where no truths are self-evident and no dreams have anchors on which to cling. They muddle through life, viewing excruciatingly painful conditions through the lens of absurdity; they filter every event through the membrane of their sensitive aristocracy; but unlike Ibsen and Strindberg's aristocratic characters,

the slightest irregularity in their lives triggers sadness rather than rage, regret rather than histrionics, inertia rather than action, and forgiveness rather than revenge. His characters seem incapable of fighting back (the three sisters, for instance), or if they do, the defense mechanisms emerge in an act of folly (Vanya shooting the Professor, for instance). It is clichéd to say one must laugh at the worst of times, but with Chekhov it makes perfect sense – yet his humor is mixed with pathos. “Though it is clear that Chekhov often laughs at his characters,” Joseph Wood Krutch observes, “he nevertheless holds them in great affection.” This is because his characters cannot cope with the modern world, their floundering and pathetic attempts to take action are simultaneously moving and ridiculous to watch. The real trouble with Chekhov’s people, Krutch explains, “is that they belong to the past. They are surviving nobility and gentry of a dead age. They do nothing because there is nothing for them to do. Their political, social, and economic environment has disappeared, leaving them stranded.”<sup>286</sup>

Chekhov was, like Ibsen and Strindberg, born modestly and had to work at an early age to survive. He also, like them, attempted to be a doctor, but unlike them, succeeded. Throughout his life he was humble, self-effacing, and would rather fish than be in the spotlight. He also had a devilish, prankster side to him, and a marvelous sense of humor, a fact that surfaces throughout his writings. His early plays were one-act vaudeville skits published in comic stories for newspapers. He was a short-story writer and gained recognition as an author as well as a playwright.

The fact that Chekhov was a short-story writer informs his playwriting. Though he never wrote a novel, he still emerged from the tradition of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and other Russian realistic novelists.<sup>287</sup> Like them, he purged the stories of dogma and mysticism (though like Tolstoy he had his biases – simple, rural characters are generally good, urban sophisticates generally not, but he was hardly dogmatic about this); and like them, his roots are in the literary form known as romance. His plays are filled with love stories at cross purposes, but with a modern rather than chivalric emphasis, meaning that now romances have to negotiate the refractory problems of modern civilization: sex and propriety, finance and marriage, work and home life, social mobility and the family. Gone are the myths, fables, and folk-tales of medieval romance; instead the modern novel concerns reportage and psychology. “The main thing is – father and mother must eat,” he says in his advice to playwrights, meaning that romance is never far removed from the facts of life.<sup>288</sup> Rather than magic and wonderment, the new emphasis is the humdrum, portraying a secular and empirical world rather than an other-worldly fairy tale. Culture, not nature or the super-natural, takes center stage; real space replaces transcendental metaphysics; and everything has punctiliar roots – a particular point in time – that supersede

the eternal picturesque. Love, therefore, is hardly ethereal – heart-stopping fantasy and last-minute rescues in traditional melodrama; instead, love in Chekhov's plays clashes against the concrete and the material – the disenchanting, hard-headed realism of the modern world. Chekhov obtains great comic mileage when he depicts the clash of romantic idealism and buck-stops-here reality; for all the forlorn loquacity about love that we hear in the dialogue we also witness the comprehensive fullness of reality – the realism of quotidian routines that deaden passion, kill the spirit, and turn love into something detached from chivalric romance. For Chekhov, this clash is humorous; it reveals irony and folly in a way that still respects the characters but never caters to their foolishness. Puck's "What fools these mortals be" underlines Chekhov's sense of humor; he illustrates each character's attempts to find love or purpose in life like scurrying creatures in Shakespeare's Athenian woods. Yet the foolishness is not without its pathos because the longings we observe are sincere, the needs real, and the passions genuine. Chekhov puts his characters through their travails within an intricate web of other people's needs and desires. Peter Gay's remarks about the realistic novel are appropriate for Chekhov; the realism, he says, "is so rich in comprehensive implications precisely because it puts characters through their paces across time and space as though they are real persons growing into a microcosm of their culture and history. It treats them as individuals solidly anchored in their world, in *this* world."<sup>289</sup> And this world, for Chekhov, is other people.

Chekhov's characters suffer from ennui weighing like an albatross. The concept of "boredom" arose alongside the modern bourgeoisie and the modern novel and took root in the nineteenth century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes the first appearance of the term "boredom" in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852), citing the "malady of boredom." By the late nineteenth century the malady of boredom is a reoccurring phenomenon in literature and drama. This boredom was something new and different from lassitude and tedium experienced prior to the nineteenth century; it is inextricably connected to the Industrial Revolution, the rise of individualism, excess leisure time, and the notion of happiness derived from personal responsibility – not something God-given or endowed. It results in individual gains in self-importance and the simultaneous loss of self-control; humans are now the center of attention – and have the time to reflect on this – but they fail to know how to make their "center" entertaining, amusing, or meaningful. In Chekhov's plays, characters are submerged in boredom, so much so that their attempts to break out of it are doomed. They fail to rise to the occasion – any occasion. In a comment about his protagonist, Ivanov, in an early play, Chekhov says that "Men like Ivanov do not solve problems, but instead collapse under their weight."<sup>290</sup> Terry Eagleton's following remarks about

Samuel Beckett are apropos of Chekhov, too, and link Chekhov's and Beckett's modernism:

Beckett's world is populated by those who fall below the tragic, who fluff their big moments, fail to rise to their dramatic occasions, cannot quite summon up the rhetoric to ham successfully and are too drained and depleted to engage in colourful theatrical combat. It is not just that the epic actions are a thing of the past, but that action itself is over. For these ontologically famished figures, getting the simplest action off the ground is as baffling a business as carrying out some high-risk, exquisitely intricate technical operation. At least [Racine's] Phaedra and Hedda Gabler are up to their roles, carry them off with brio and panache, whereas these puppets and pedants bungle even that, muff even that amount of meaning. In these parched, starving landscapes, men and women can no longer rise to significance, let alone sublimity. Striking tragic postures is just another way of passing the time, along with sucking stones or pulling on your trousers. We have finally stumbled upon a solution to tragedy, but it is known not as redemption but the absurd, a realm in which nothing stays long enough to merit tragic status.<sup>291</sup>

Despite his compassion, Chekhov could be unremittingly hard on his characters. Chekhov suffered from tuberculosis at an early age and because of this and other financial hardships he took a dim view of self-indulgence. He never lets his characters off the hook; they are always responsible for their condition, even though they are often given limited choices (or limited from their narrow perspectives) and their mistakes often occurred in the past. They are living through decisions made earlier and as a result their behavior is an attempt to erase, adjust, or reverse a course that is inevitably unfixable. We sympathize with the effort even though we know it is fruitless. Henri Arvon, borrowing from Georg Lukács, notes that Chekhov "dramatizes the conflict between the subjective intentions of his heroes and their objective situation. Though he understands the feelings of the characters, which he usually shares, the spectator nonetheless is intensely aware of the conflict between the characters' subjective emotions, for which he feels a profound sympathy, and the objective nature of reality whose preponderant influence he recognizes."<sup>292</sup>

Chekhov also took a dim view of self-delusion. The illusion of artistic success in *The Seagull*, the unswerving devotion to the pretentious Professor in *Uncle Vanya*, the mythic panacea of Moscow in *The Three Sisters*, and the dream of an orchard's wealth in *The Cherry Orchard* are indicative of his mistrust. *The Three Sisters*, for example, live in a world of filigreed self-absorption rather than pragmatic transcendence; they will never get to Moscow, literally or otherwise. Their actions are polarized by doubt, overwhelmed by an abundance of choices, and whorled by their turbid emotions. This is because his characters are mired in habit from which they are unable to extricate themselves. Habit, writes Samuel Beckett, "is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit." Because Chekhov's characters are conditioned by rote, the "pernicious devotion of



habit paralyses our attention, drugs those handmaidens of perception whose co-operation is not absolutely essential.”<sup>293</sup> Habit begets boredom, and vice versa; the present moment for Chekhov’s characters is a deadening existence caught between challenged beliefs and future uncertainty. His characters’ *cri du coeur*, often done ludicrously and at the most inopportune times, is generally to the affect of “I could have been” or “If I only knew.” The past held false promises in which the characters believed; now, in the present, they understand the mistakes but are powerless to reverse course; the imminent future will merely be a feedback loop. The characters suffer from what Laurence Senelick calls “propinquity,”<sup>294</sup> a chaffing nearness and over-familiarity, as well as an existential isolation from others. Arnold Hauser contends that “Chekhov’s philosophy is the first to hinge on the experience of the unapproachable isolation of men, their inability to bridge the last gap that divides them, or, even if they do sometimes succeed in doing that, to persist in an intimate nearness to one another, which is so typical of the whole of impressionism.” Chekhov’s characters, Hauser adds, are “filled with the feeling of absolute hopelessness, of the incurable crippling of the will-power, on the one hand, and of the fruitlessness of all effort, on the other.” The Impressionists like Degas and others flatten the frame and move “important parts of the representation to the edge of the picture, and makes the frame overlap them”; Chekhov likewise defuses the focus “in order to arouse the impression of the inconclusiveness, abruptness, and casual, arbitrary ending of the works.”<sup>295</sup> Major events in Chekhov’s plays – suicides, shootings, affairs, the sale of the home, departures – happen offstage, reinforcing the feeling of inconclusiveness and detachment. Drama happens elsewhere; his characters are nowhere near the action. But this is Chekhov’s charm – we are engaged by people who, like us, feel distantiated from events, detached from excitement, and dispersed in a realm of insignificance. Chekhov’s plays make us see people differently – sympathetically yet objectively – bringing to the fore patterns, relationships, whole aspects of things which are there in our visual field but overshadowed, made recessive by routine and inertia. He gave voice to people in purgatory: not hell, as tragedy would have it, but in limbo, whose inarticulate stuttering, ellipses, and half-formed sentences are expressions of the un-heroic.

Known for his slice-of-life depictions, Chekhov actually selects events to demonstrate onstage what is hardly a casual and causal scan of human interaction. Rather, he quite specifically chooses events for maximum dramatic effect, even if what appears on the surface seems ordinary and random. His dialogue is layered in ambivalence; the people in Chekhov’s plays oscillate between romantic ideals and myopia; Einstein allegedly said that “insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results,” which is best exemplified by Chekhov. This idea, in fact, can apply as much to Samuel Beckett as it can to Chekhov. According to Thomas Hobbes, the “life of man” is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,”<sup>296</sup> and Chekhov and Beckett, along

Hobbesian lines, bring an understanding of tortured souls and a gift for the ways people delude themselves. Chekhov engrosses us with characters that fumble, stutter, talk endlessly about mundane matters, and try pitifully but nobly to grope for some meaningful life. He anticipates Beckett's landscape of aimless wanderers, characters who are simultaneously ornate and profane, subtle and ridiculous, and portrays a theatre of the absurd through the paradigm of realism. His ability to orchestrate multiple relationships without sacrificing detailed characterizations, and his talent for fleshing out the nuances and subtext that inform human interactions, set the gold standard for modern drama. He captured the buzzwords of the modern existential condition – angst, ennui, boredom, helplessness, and despair – couching these feelings and attributes into sublime comedy. His characters struggle with inner demons and inveigh against moral injustice while they themselves commit acts of insensitivity. They suffer guilt, set goals they never achieve, have affairs, betray lovers, cross the line of their own morality, while being simultaneously aware of their own follies and shortcomings.

Chekhov is notable for claiming himself to be an objective observer. This is not entirely accurate; there is a moral subtext in his plays and, however subtle, a hierarchy of values. He was aware of the fading Christian morality (think of Sonya's speech at the end of *Uncle Vanya*) that ushered in a new climate of thought and a new autonomy of ideas. This new freedom created its own obstacles, ones which his characters fail to understand. Stephen Spender notes that there "runs through modern criticism the fantasy of a Second Fall of Man." The First Fall is Biblical, associated with original sin, exile from the Garden of Eden, and codes of conduct related to good and evil. The Second, Spender maintains, results "from the introduction of scientific utilitarian values and modes of thinking into the world of personal choice between good and evil, with the result that values cease to be personal and become identified with the usefulness or destructiveness of social systems and material things."<sup>297</sup> Chekhov's people struggle with a newfound responsibility of being modern; the path to moral choice seems vast and boundless, with only one's conscious as a guide. We are left to our own devices, and too frequently our actions fall short of our expectations.

Chekhov's structural balance – his skill in depicting several relationships simultaneously – brought to the theatre a powerful way of representing a landscape of voices colliding with each other. This is a result of modern acting as much as modern dramaturgy. Before Chekhov, performance was declamatory. Star actors moved about the stage like chess pieces, using their center-stage presence for mega power. Chekhov changed all that, demanding – by dint of his ensemble writing – group cohesion. Yet his characters are also solipsistic, selfishly concerned with their own plight. Above all, in Chekhov's plays subtlety replaced caricature, depth replaced stereotype, and complexity made it difficult

to discern the author's moral outlook. But a moral outlook arises. In Chekhov's plays a social portrait emerges from seeming small talk – bickering, joking, and gossiping – and from such conversation a sense of an entire economic and social system stacked un-winnably against his characters comes into focus; a social structure in which the tenuous fabric of interconnected threads is on the cusp of unraveling and a backdrop of seismic change is about to unfold. He presents material signs – surfaces – in order to uncover the indirect readability of these signs. Chekhov asserts correspondences between place and person and insists we think of one in juxtaposition with the other, but he does this without the narrow determinism often associated with realism and especially naturalism.

Like Impressionism, which Chekhov is often compared to, his canvas depicts multiple points of view. Samuel Beckett's description of Impressionism could fit Chekhov, whose works follow the "non-logical statement of phenomena in the order and exactitude of their perception, before they have been distorted into intelligibility in order to be forced into a chain of cause and effect."<sup>298</sup> Chekhov's language is halting, stuttering, and indirect; the focal point of the dialogue is what M. M. Bakhtin called "heteroglossia" – language that is diverse and responsive, not driven by a single meaning but vast congeries of contested meanings.<sup>299</sup> What we have is what Clement Greenberg describes in Impressionistic painting as "the 'decentralized,' 'polyphonic,' all-over picture which, with a surface knit together of a multiplicity of identical or similar elements, repeats itself without strong variation from one end of the canvas to the other and dispenses, apparently, with beginning, middle, and ending."<sup>300</sup>

Chekhov sets before us characters obliged to act in a world of unstable values and bear the weight of an ever-present immediacy of moral decision making. To go to Moscow, to carry on an affair, to sell an estate, to become an artist, or to call the bluff of a pretentious Professor are moral decisions that become the plays' subject matter. These matters appear trivial, quotidian, and non-earth-shaking – and this is Chekhov's point. Large historical events appear beyond the control of the characters, who are preoccupied with everyday concerns; yet inductively the small concerns reflect the big picture. His plays are modern in that they incorporate characters making and unmaking decisions based on self-assigned meaning all the while trapped in past values that no longer hold cachet. Chekhov's characters are suspended in a state of limbo between Voltaire-like reason and Rousseau-like impulse. At the same time, they possess a vibrancy and desire to connect to nature. Hence, Chekhov's people are both conformists and iconoclasts; they follow the path of moral obligation but are compelled to violate morality in favor of fulfilling Romantic impulses. "Fulfilling my nature," Charles Taylor informs us regarding Romanticism, "means espousing the inner élan, the voice or impulse."<sup>301</sup> This is one reason for Chekhovian "inaction." The spectator is intensely aware of this reason-versus-impulse tension and feels

profound sympathy for the people caught between polar opposites. His characters lodge in the interstitial space between inertia and despair precisely because they are free agents who cannot make up their minds to do good or act on impulse. They answer to no one but their morality, but ironically it is a self-imposed moral consciousness that shackles their ability to act. If Ibsen's characters are restrained by a duty imposed from without, Chekhov's people stumble because of duty imposed from within. They are victims of an embarrassment of riches, at least in terms of moral choices. Being far less uptight than Ibsen's characters (for instance, think of Rosmer and Rebecca versus Masha and Vershinin), they carry on affairs, yet, as a consequence of their transgressions and impulses, follow with guilt. If Ibsen's characters portray timidity because of social duty and *limited options*, Chekhov's people portray tentativeness because they have *too many options*.

Like Ibsen, though, Chekhov embraced symbols. Ibsen's eponymous wild duck shot in the attic and the seagull cavalierly bagged by the morose would-be playwright Treplev and laid at the feet of his actress girlfriend Nina are the most obvious, but there is more. As I have noted elsewhere, "Chekhovian dramas may be thought of symbolically as shadows projected upon life's interior. Symbols are not thrust upon us like icons; they are made to slip into consciousness by means of verbal repetition. The Russian phrase *pogranichnoe sostoianie* ('a boundary state-of-mind') suggests a kind of walking on the edge."<sup>302</sup> Whether it is a young author and actress struggling to find their artistic voices, characters adrift in the countryside, noble sisters seeking a lost virtue and dignity, or an aristocracy enveloped by an increasingly commercialized society, Chekhov's people tend to be spiritual voyagers shipwrecked in a vulgar and materialistic world, misfits who never really outgrew their adolescent feelings of estrangement. They identify with their innocence and childhoods with a tenacity bordering on manic desperation; they reflect back on their lives with a philosophical resignation that their purpose in the world might one day disappear entirely. They are not so much bitter as despairing; their self-reflection can also be self-mocking (they blame themselves, too); and their self-referential experiences mix banality and profundity. Chekhov views these people with empathy and distance; he limns their psyches, while conjuring up a sophisticated backdrop of a society in transition. In doing so, he not only domesticates the innovations of modernism – the use of stream of conscious monologues and rants to probe the characters' inner lives – he also presages the self-inventorying of modern dramas that would glide down the slippery slope of navel-gazing in the Me-generations to come. His characters are bright, charming, and gregarious, yet simultaneously self-indulgent (and Chekhov holds their feet to the fire for this). Their compassion mixes with vexing boorishness; they are at once lovers and know love's shortcomings; and their prescient self-awareness is contradicted by their blind-spots and elliptical evasions.

### *The Seagull: Art vs Art*

A play opens. In Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1896), this opening is twofold: the play you are about to see, and a play being prepared for presentation by two young artists, Nina and Treplev. There is more at stake here than the clichéd "play-within-a-play"; art is the cornerstone of meaning for these characters. Chekhov explores "theatre" and how art intertwines with love, celebrity, technique, form, style, definition, and most of all commercial success versus artistic integrity. In the end commercialism wins, but not without a fight – literally to the death. In the first act a young, taciturn, would-be Hamlet and playwright, Treplev, stages a one-character play with his lover, the aspiring actress Nina, as his muse and leading actress. The audience is his brittle hauteur mother, Arkadina, a famous but fading diva; her new boyfriend, the preening Trigorin, a famous author (though by his own admission hardly Tolstoy) wandering their country estate in search of short-story topics; and a trove of servants and family members. The shadow of his mother's celebrity has cast a toxic cloud over Treplev, who seeks to show his mother and her lover that there is more to art than commercial fame. His play, a mix of avant-garde esotericism and symbolist flights of fancy, is literally staged in Act One. The play-within-a-play will later haunt the characters, culminating in Nina's reciting the same words in Act Four – two years later.

Treplev's "new form" of theatre is a direct attack on the folderol of commercial melodrama that had made his mother famous. But Treplev's brand of avant-gardism also comes under Chekhov's sharp criticism; it is self-indulgent (his mother calls it "avant-garde gibberish"), though it bears the mark of talent (Dorn says "it makes a powerful impression"). In a letter of 1948, Jack Kerouac's muse, Neal Cassady, set out ideas that would shape Kerouac's freewheeling style: "I have always held that when one writes, one should forget all rules, literary styles, and other such pretensions. [...] Rather, I think one should write, as nearly as possible, as if he [the author] were the first person on earth."<sup>303</sup> Compare this to Treplev's remarks on writing just before Nina's entrance: "Yes, I'm more and more convinced that the point isn't old or new forms, it's to write and not think about form, because it's pouring freely out of your soul" (179). The irony here is that at the very moment Treplev breaks through to self-awareness and embraces a Beat-poet improvisational style, he is thrust back to his past with the knocking of Nina at the door. It is as if Treplev reaches a maturity only to be placed in a grade school reunion, where old habits and gestures return despite ourselves.

By all accounts, in the final act Nina has become a mediocre actress and Treplev her equally mediocre writer. The constant performing in third-rate theatres, the obligatory travel, the loss of her and Trigorin's child, and the sexual

innuendoes during her theatre tours made by merchants, have unmoored Nina from her artistry. Like all the characters in *The Seagull*, she is caught up in the vortex of artistic jealousy, where every remembered incident or activity is dipped in the acid of envy. Treplev is jealous of Trigorin; Trigorin of other famous writers; and Arkadina of Nina's youth and Trigorin's attraction to her. Nina's return brings back memories of her life as a "seagull," when she naively believed in herself and her art. She tells Treplev that she still loves Trigorin, but this may or may not be true. In the end, she cannot be with Treplev until she finds her footing; not unlike Nora in *A Doll's House*, though without the heavily political template, Nina cannot return Treplev's love. He places her on a pedestal; his love is overly-romantic, unrealistic, and fantastical. In matters of love Treplev has failed to mature. He tells her "You've found your path, you know where you're going, but I'm still drifting in a chaos of day dreams and images, without knowing what or whom it's for. I have no faith and I don't know what my calling is" (182–3). This is precisely what Dorn warned him of two years ago in Act One: "Every work of art ought to have a clear, well-defined idea. You ought to know what you're writing for; otherwise, you'll travel this picturesque path without a well-defined goal, you'll go astray and your talent will destroy you" (149). Nina more or less repeats this advice: "Now I know, understand, Kostya, that in our work – it doesn't matter whether we act or we write – the main thing isn't fame, glamour, the things I dreamed about, it's knowing how to endure. I know how to shoulder my cross and I have faith. I have faith and it's not so painful for me, and when I think about my calling, I'm not afraid of life" (181). This advice, unfortunately, continues unheeded.

Nina is well-aware of Treplev's previous suicide attempt two years earlier. She knows his obsession for her; the burden of his life on her shoulders is crushing; she must do and say anything to prevent his despair from leading him down another fatal course. She must objurgate him, but delicately, or he will try suicide again. She fails, but her attempt to keep him from falling off the cliff and still be honest about her feelings is a remarkable balancing act, one of the great skills of Chekhovian dialogue. Her speeches oscillate from her life as an actress, to the present, to their creation two years past (she still remembers the lines from the play), to her tremendous fatigue. His fate is in the hands of a twenty-one-year-old girl coming into maturity but still too inexperienced to save the suicidal Treplev. Her energy is a centrifugal force careening emotionally up and down the scales of human feeling. Her assertions have a Christian moral undertone, but also come from a desperation to keep Treplev alive rather than rock-solid faith. The same emphasis on faith and endurance surfaces in Sonya's speech to her uncle at the end of the next play, *Uncle Vanya*. Religious morals surface in Chekhov from acts fraught with entreaties to live and are akin to the Beckettian panacea "I can't go on, I will go on."

But there is something more in Nina's advice; she is doing this altruistically, for the sake of Treplev. She could have ignored Treplev, brushed him aside, and chalked him up as an annoying boyfriend who can't take a hint – and she would hardly be faulted. Treplev, in contemporary parlance, suffers from OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder); today he would have taken prescription medication for his relentless pursuit of Nina. Still, Nina's compassion is something heroic. It is not, however, the kind of heroism demanded by Chekhov's politically-minded critics. Nina's heroism is compassion *and* endurance – that she will not succumb to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Nabokov notes that the “typical Chekhovian hero was the unfortunate bearer of a vague but beautiful human truth, a burden he could neither get rid of nor carry.” These heroes, Nabokov says, “could dream; they could not rule.”<sup>304</sup> Nina, likewise, is hardly a leader; her acting will probably improve only slightly, and she will not likely attain the success Arkadina enjoyed. But in Chekhov's modest sense, she has attained a profound understanding of life. Richard Gilman notes that Chekhov is “much closer to Balzac than to Dante. Like the French writer, he hasn't any religious convictions that can make for comedy in a sublime sense, he isn't dealing in salvation.”<sup>305</sup> I'm not so sure of this; there is, for Chekhov, a salvation of sorts, one intimately linked to perseverance. We carry on through Schopenhauer's bleak mist, where “life presents itself by no means as a gift for enjoyment, but as a task, a drudgery to be performed; and in accordance with this we see, in great and small, universal need, ceaseless cares, constant pressure, endless strife, compulsory activity, with extreme exertion of all the powers of body and soul.”<sup>306</sup> The will to live for Schopenhauer is foolish, and yet, like Chekhov, there is solace in endurance. Like Beckett, too, Chekhov admires those who shoulder on despite every obstacle.

### *Uncle Vanya*

If the making of art is the crux of *The Seagull*, then art criticism is at stake in Chekhov's next play, *Uncle Vanya* (1898, generally a reworking of his earlier play *The Wood Goblin*). A retired professor and art historian, Serebryakov, now in his mid-seventies, arrives at his daughter's estate (technically a farm) with his wife, a twenty-seven-year-old toothsome intellectual who had been, some time before, enamored by the Professor's renown. They arrive for the summer, considering whether or not to take up permanent residency on the estate. Serebryakov's daughter, Sonya, from his first wife, and his brother-in-law, Vanya, tend the estate and live on it with Vanya's mother, a nanny, and a few other servants. Like all of Chekhov's major plays, a disruptive group appears in the countryside of the Russian rural outback, usually homes of the former gentry class, bringing with them the baggage of urban sophistication and

modernism and upsetting the apple cart of farm life. Much like Arkadina and Trigorin in *The Seagull*, the military in *The Three Sisters*, and the returning matriarch in *The Cherry Orchard*, the Professor and Yelena are fish out of water; bored and uninspired by farm life, they find the inhabitants dull, maudlin, and routine.

The central “action” of the play, as if any play of Chekhov’s could contain action, is Vanya’s realization that the Professor is a fraud. Now retired, the Professor’s past success has dissipated; once the talk-of-the-town in intellectual circles, the Professor’s art criticism now stands like a heap of rubbish on library shelves. In the opening act Vanya inveighs against the Professor to his friend and frequent visitor, Dr Astrov.

VANYA: A retired professor, you know what that means, a pedantic old fossil, a guppy with a terminal degree. [...] Now this guppy lives on his first wife’s estate, lives there reluctantly because he can’t afford to live in town – Endlessly gripping about his bad luck, although as a matter of fact he is incredibly lucky. (*Jittery*). [...] For precisely twenty-five years the man reads and writes about art, although he understands absolutely nothing about art. For twenty-five years he chews over other people’s ideas about realism, naturalism, and the rest of that rubbish; for twenty-five years he reads and writes about stuff that intelligent people have known for ages and fools couldn’t care less about – which means, for twenty-five years he’s pouring the contents of one empty bottle into another emptier bottle. And add to that, his conceit! His pretensions! He’s gone into retirement and not a single living soul has ever heard of him, he is totally obscure; which means, for twenty-five years he took up someone else’s place. But look at him! He struts about like a demigod!

ASTROV: Sounds like you’re jealous (200).

Jealous, indeed, and though full of hectoring and hyperbole, accurate. Vanya wants to be in Serebryakov’s place: have his wife, Yelena, for himself, and have the success that he feels was stolen by his devotion to the Professor. Vanya’s speech is in itself a lecture – it bespeaks his frustration, but also his continuing vicarious relationship to art history, which he wishes he, not his brother-in-law, could experience. By the second act, Vanya’s unhappiness builds through a violent stormy night, where no one can sleep and the characters’ restless desires clash inexorably. Vanya is right about the Professor – he is a fraud – but there is nothing he can do about it. He has devoted his life to the Professor’s well being and intellectual success and cannot take this back. Yelena’s eyes are also now open to her husband’s shortcomings, but she, too, cannot change her marital decision. Sonya finds Yelena a romantic threat to her relationship with Doctor Astrov. Astrov, an alcoholic who probably killed a switchman on an operating table and is now condemned to treating the sick in Russia’s outskirts, holds fast to his environmentalism and his unwillingness to commit



emotionally to Sonya. And the Professor realizes the estate has not lived up to his expectations. Everyone, it seems, paid a price for beliefs that no longer sustain them.

Act Three of *Uncle Vanya* contains the comic timing, emotional intensity, romantic frustration, existential angst, and structural detail that modern dramatists have tried to emulate throughout the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries. The act begins mildly enough: the Professor has asked everyone to assemble after lunch for a speech. Yelena professes her boredom, Sonya suggests she perform volunteer work, and Vanya urges her to have an affair. This last is an affront to her dignity: Vanya apologizes and exits to pick flowers as an act of attrition. Astrov then arrives to meet with Yelena; Yelena tells Sonya she will “question him discreetly – he won’t even notice” (220) that her inquiry is about their relationship. Romantically, of course, this never works; as Shakespeare reminds us, love inquiries about someone else always turns love comically onto the messenger. Yelena knows this, and Chekhov provides her with a monologue that uncovers her guilt, passions, and frustrations. When Astrov enters, he comes equipped with diagrams, maps, drawings, and a greeting: “Good afternoon,” he says, “You wanted to see my drawings?” (221). In contemporary parlance, this remark is equivalent to “you want to see my etchings?” Chekhov, doubtlessly, wouldn’t stoop to such crudity without also having up his sleeve another intention: the presentation of his environmentalism. The *mise-en-scène* between Yelena and Astrov typifies Chekhov’s ability to fold a message into the work without the slightest heavy-handedness; Astrov’s discussion about the environmental destruction is couched in his seduction; he lays one map after another on the table, demonstrating the deforestation and ruination, while all along it is Yelena whom he wishes would recline on the table. As he points from one end of the maps to another, the choreography is one of bodily attraction; he is committed to the environment, yet the more he tries to talk about it, the more she is disinterested. After some roundabout talk of Sonya’s love, Astrov drops the mask and seduces her. At the precise moment they kiss Vanya enters; this is at once comic and a set up for the coming climax. Vanya’s existential angst is piled on: first he finds that Yelena is indeed capable of an affair, but just not with him; and then the Professor enters about to kick him out of the house.

The Professor’s hortative speech ultimately reveals his intent to sell the land for profit. His remarks fail to take Vanya or Sonya into account; devoid of gratitude for their efforts, making no acknowledgement of their sacrifice, the Professor declares that the estate is to be sold. This ingratitude, coupled with seeing Yelena in the arms of his best friend, unleashes Vanya’s vitriol. After verbally accosting the Professor, Vanya says, “I might have evolved into a Schopenhauer, a Dostoevsky” (238), and just as quickly retreats from these remarks. He desperately turns to his Mother for advice, but finds little solace. Before storming out, he says, “You’re going to remember me!” (229).

In Vanya, Chekhov captures the essential traumatic nature of modern experience. The myriad of circumstances all converge on Vanya's existential condition: the abiding sense that his passion is not returned, his work is for naught, and his purpose in life is meaningless. The psychological, historical, and ethical conditions aggregate on the traumatic experience that shatters his consciousness. Vanya is the precursor to Willy Loman; both are felled by their ideals and romantic precepts. Memory, in Chekhov and Miller, is tied to the traumatic; all of Vanya's memories are about wrongheaded decisions. Vanya wants to recover a past that is un-recoverable. Cathy Caruth remarks that the ability to recover the past is "closely and paradoxically tied up, in trauma, with the inability to have access to it." Vanya's frustration amounts to a flashback of his wasted life. The "flashback," Caruth writes, "is not simply an overwhelming experience that has been obstructed by a later repression or amnesia, but an event that is itself constituted, in part, by its lack of integration into consciousness."<sup>307</sup> Vanya, unable to bear rejection and ingratitude, reacts in a hopeless comic action: by shooting the Professor he will erase the past, or so he thinks, and satiate a revenge that even he finds absurd. That he misses twice, at point blank range, testifies to his doubts.

As Vanya endures the presence of the Professor cosseted by everyone in the house, he acquires a resentment that is comic as well as sad. The acquisition of empathetic wisdom – Vanya's illuminated realization that the Professor is a fraud – does not turn Vanya into a figure of tragic stature, but rather an absurd individual struggling to come to grips with a wrong choice ("How am I to go on living," he pleads to Astrov in Act Four). The Professor is an academic pop-injay, a man of "learning" who wraps the idea of work ethics in the punctilio of virtue. His parting words to the family – "Good bye ... Good-bye, all! (*Giving his hand to Astrov*). I respect your ways of thinking, your enthusiasms, effusion, but allow an old man to add to his valediction this one observation: one must take action, my friends! One must take action!" (236) – underscore an ironic cruelty. The family has done little else but "action" on his behalf. For Vanya, aiding the Professor now that he knows who he is – and that he tries to kill him, too – makes any future "action" an ironic and cruel joke.

In the end Vanya's cause is just. Richard Gilman posits that Stanislavsky's direction of the play misinterpreted Chekhov's intent. Stanislavsky wrote in *My Life in Art* that in *Uncle Vanya*, "an untalented, irrelevant professor enjoys the pleasures of life, he has the undeserved reputation of a famous scholar, he is the darling of Petersburg," but in the end he is "shown up" and "it turns out that Serebriakov is a soup bubble, not worthy of his high position, while men of real talent, like Uncle Vanya and Astrov, rot away in the backwoods of Russia."<sup>308</sup> According to Gilman, the "Professor is most certainly not 'shown up,' and while Vanya may be on occasion clever and is fundamentally good-hearted, nothing indicates that he is in any way 'talented.'"<sup>309</sup> A close reading of the play

suggests otherwise. In the climactic moment of the third act, Vanya has run off stage to retrieve his pistol. His intention is, at that moment, unbeknownst to everyone; the Professor is still stung by Vanya's remarks and Sonya, in a desperate effort at reconciliation, pleads with her father to patch things up.

SEREBRYAKOV: The most insignificant creature!

SONYA: (*Kneeling, turns to her father, nervously, through tears*). Open your heart, Papa! Remember when you were younger, Uncle Vanya and Granny would spend nights translating books for you, copying your own writings ... every night, every night! Uncle Vanya and I worked without rest, afraid to spend a penny on ourselves, and sent everything to you ... We had to pay our own way! I'm not saying this right, it's not what I mean, but you understand us, Papa. Open your heart! (229).

Amidst Sonya's impassionate entreaty, a great deal of past history is disclosed (albeit in an emotional and disjointed manner) – part of which is Vanya's talent for translating foreign languages. Not only did Vanya translate books and articles *for* the Professor – who, evidently, could not read foreign languages sufficiently – it can be argued that it was Vanya, with the help of his mother, who brought the Professor's articles *into the light of European modernism*. During the late nineteenth century the three main European intellectual languages were English, German, and French; Russia was still considered a backward nation, at least in philosophy and art criticism (though not in literature, where it excelled). For Serebryakov to gain ground in cutting-edge scholarly circles, he would have had to read *and publish* in the lingua franca of intellectual discourse. His success would have had to be cemented in nations outside Russia to achieve prominence, and getting his works across national borders required translations. It is suggested in Sonya's speech that he was provided access to English, French, and German art criticism and philosophy through Vanya's translations, and if this is true – and we have no reason to doubt Sonya's veracity on this matter – then the Professor's articles were then submitted to the leading journals of the time. For Gilman to suggest that “nothing indicates that Vanya is in any way talented” is to miss the most significant and moving force of the play: Vanya's reasons for existential frustration. If Vanya is simply a jealous crank – envious without reason other than the grass is greener somewhere else – then the absurdity of the play fails to materialize; Vanya, then, is merely a shallow kvetch occupying the stage for long periods with nothing more than cryptic and surly behavior. The play becomes little more than a sterile exercise devoid of compassion. But the play's emotional linchpin is grounded in the absurd circumstance that Vanya is a talented polyglot and *absolutely right* about the Professor – yet there is *nothing he can do about it*. It is too late; he cannot

change the past; he should never have cast his lot with the Professor, blind as he was to the pedant's scrofulous ego. But he did, with magnanimity and unselfish devotion, leading to a tremendous sacrifice characterized by his hero-worshipping altruism. He worked the farm successfully by day and translated the Professor's writings by night. This is talent and then some.

For all his objectivity, Chekhov is a moralist. For him, altruism is a virtue (though complaining is a vice). By the end of the nineteenth century, the moral idea of altruism took root. It never exercised a personal effect on the majority of people and was generally rejected and even mocked by many. To those it affected, however, it was perceived intensely as an ethic of service to others; it had Christian roots and an aesthetic variant; and in both cases it shaped something like a moral avant garde. Its attraction was its life-changing message: *live for others*. We see this in Vanya, we will see it again in the charity of the three sisters in his next play, and the generosity of Lyubov Andreevna in the final play, *The Cherry Orchard* (though for Lyubov this altruism can also appear frivolous). The Christian version was cloaked in philosophical idealism; self-realization emerges through acts for the common good. The term "altruism," however, belonged to the aesthetic and intellectual realm. The word was probably coined by the philosophic positivist Auguste Comte and meant the devotion to the welfare of others as a principle of action (*vivre pour autrui*). This devotion comes into focus in the final act, when we see Vanya and Sonya return to their work stations and carry on as if nothing has happened.

The play's depiction of place moves inwardly, from the garden in Act One, the dining room in Two, the parlor in Three, and Vanya's bedroom in Four (a room that also serves as the office of the estate). In Chekhov, the spaces of private life are a generative locale – a grid of social relations that shifts and morphs, often upending individuals who traverse it. The plays are attuned to architectural dynamics of private and public, spatial hierarchies determined by class, gender, and routines surrounding work and play. Laurence Senelick notes that "The more inward the play moves in terms of locale, the more the sense of oppression mounts. Chekhov uses weather and seasons along with certain verbal echoes to produce this feeling."<sup>310</sup> We are going further than surfaces; as *Uncle Vanya* progresses we are moving inwardly to Vanya's space and deeper into his psyche. Chekhov dramatizes this interiority spatially and aesthetically; the stifling heat, rain, and the progression of time over the course of a summer provides a sense of mounting pressure on Vanya. A map of Africa is on Vanya's wall, "*apparently of no use to anyone here*," Chekhov coyly says in the stage directions. The map signifies several possibilities: Vanya's entrapment (he cannot travel) or merely Chekhov's impish humor ("you'll never guess what it means!" he seems to be saying). Vanya earlier reports that he gave up his inheritance of the house on behalf of his sister, so she could support herself and her new husband, the Professor. The house that the Professor

attempts to put up for sale is the house Vanya was likely born in, and in Gaston Bachelard's words, an "oneiric house, a house of dream-memory, that is lost in the shadow of a beyond of the real past."<sup>311</sup> As with all of Chekhov's plays, memory is ambiguous yet personal, blurred by misunderstandings yet still deeply emotional. For Vanya, the house is his identity, filled with his attachments, and probably signifies his fantasy-dreams of travel to Africa and more.

In the end, everyone leaves. The Doctor will likely visit occasionally rather than regularly, avoiding Sonya and the possibility of marriage. Characters repeat "They're gone" or "He's gone," referring to the Doctor, Yelena, and Serebryakov, and the silence is deafening. Vanya buries himself in work, returning to the accounting and book-keeping he neglected all summer. Telegin, a servant, quietly strums his guitar. The music underscores the melancholy. Suddenly Vanya is overwhelmed with sadness, turns to his niece, Sonya, "*running his hand through her hair*," and says, "Dearest child, how hard it is! Oh how hard it is!" (238). His intentions reflect not merely his own alienation, but his compassion for his niece, who has perhaps suffered more than anyone in this play. The presence of Yelena and the ensuing events have nullified her chance of marrying Astrov. Yet Sonya doesn't relinquish hope, ending the play with a plea for endurance – much like Nina in *The Seagull* – noting their sacrifice and evoking God's assurance that life in the hereafter will bring peace and comfort. It is a remarkable ending, not because of the eschatological language – it is hard to believe Chekhov took religion seriously – but rather in the atmospheric relationship between two human beings who have experienced embarrassment, humiliation, and rejection, and yet persevere in a bond matched by Beckett's tramps Vladimir and Estragon. Nietzsche wrote that the aim of Greek tragedy was "as a saving sorceress, expert at healing." Art alone, he says, "knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live: these are the sublime as the artistic taming of the horrible, and the comic as the artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity."<sup>312</sup> The spectator identifies with the tragic hero, finding meaning in his or her ill-fated strivings and experiences metaphysical comfort that, despite the horrific destruction of life's manifestations, endurance is still our saving grace. Chekhov takes Nietzsche's Dionysian truths that individuals are fated to disappear in life's inevitable flux to heart, but instead of Aristotle's cathartic reassurance or Nietzsche's bacchanal release, he presents no false promises, ham-fisted reassurance, or climactic purgation. There is instead an honesty – a clear-eyed and unflinching view of the world – that few artists dare to depict. All that is left is as it was before: Sonya and Vanya working endlessly. Like the simplicity and details found in Cezanne's card players or Van Gogh's washer woman, these are the activities of life in the modern world, and any romantic pretense to some transcendent transfiguration is disingenuous.

*The Three Sisters and Photography*

Chekhov's final two plays, *The Three Sisters* (1901) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), are his most ensemble-oriented dramas. This is not to say that *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya* are solo ventures; they, too, are broad gatherings of multiple perspectives. But *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* defy any notion of a central protagonist; they are, rather, like snap-shots, photos taken to represent a time that once was and will never be again. In *The Three Sisters*, three siblings in their twenties (and their brother) mourn the passing of their father, a highly respected officer, and their former way of life. *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* resemble Strindberg's *The Father* and *Miss Julie*, and Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* and *Hedda Gabler*, in that they represent the conflict of the past and modernism. But unlike Ibsen and Strindberg, Chekhov is content to show this transition without hyperbole, histrionics, or "drama." The atmosphere in *The Three Sisters* is heavy and static, yet the air is violently charged with the electricity of buried desires, oppressed hopes, and the decaying language of a fading culture. The persistence of echoes, of half-forgotten memories of a dead world, links Chekhov to Beckett and other subsequent playwrights.

The characters in *The Three Sisters* exist in stasis, as if they are posing for a photograph. The first act of *The Three Sisters*, in fact, appears to be constructed like a photograph. At the end of the first act a photographer takes a family portrait with the invited guests. The temporal progression of the first act is the process of a photograph that is moving into focus, but also, in Roland Barthe's words, moving towards the "imperious signs" of "future death."<sup>313</sup> The way of life for the characters is decaying, dying; yet until the act's end, everything is blurry. Throughout the act the middle sister, Masha, twenty-five, floats in and out of the conversation reciting hazy snatches of a poem; the unmarried grammar school teacher Olga (the oldest, late twenties) waxes nostalgic about her father; and the youngest, Irina, now twenty, chatters aimlessly about work and dedication. We know that a military regiment has bivouacked in the area, and visiting officers, primarily Lieutenant Colonel Vershinin, Baron Lieutenant Tusenbach, and Staff Captain Solyony, arrive as guests in the Prozorov household. But it is later that we sharpen the view and learn that each is romantically interested in the sisters – Vershinin (married to a clinging wife) with Masha, and both Tusenbach and Solyony with Irina. Nothing comes into focus until the end of the act, when we see the brother of the three sisters, Andrey, with his love interest, the gold-digging Natasha, and the assembly of characters posing for the picture.

There is something about photographs that underlies the transitional nature of the play. The portrait of the father, an officer in the Russian army, figuratively hovers over the house, his death only a year ago; his relationship

to the visiting soldiers is the catalyst for their presence. But now that he's gone, fewer soldiers arrive; Masha laments that "In the old days, when Father was alive, every time we celebrated a saint's day, some thirty or forty officers would show up, there was lots of noise; but today there's only a man and a half, and it's as desolate as a desert" (253). The half she refers to might be Solyony, might be Tusenbach; either way, she is hardly flattering either one. Vershinin has yet to arrive, but when he does, the characters philosophize mostly about how they will be remembered. The impression is a group of people already dead, already thinking of how they will be portrayed in the future. The idea of how one is portrayed is linked to photography; the portrait of the father in this play signifies his presence and stimulates discussion of how everyone in the room will be remembered – how they will be portrayed. Walter Benjamin maintains that "It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture." Early photography is the last-ditch effort to sustain what Benjamin calls the "aura," the pre-modern attempt to solicit a single point of reference as the sole source of authentication. For Benjamin, in the modern age, with its ability to reproduce photos and other entities (art, memorabilia, objects, etc.), evidence of existence and sources of inspiration are scattered along a vast but shallow plane. The pre-modern age put stock in the "aura" of singular emanation – the one locale where the object can be viewed – endowing it with deification and hegemony. The emphasis on the portrait shows "For the last time the aura [that] emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty."<sup>314</sup> In the case of *The Three Sisters*, the unseen presence of the father casts a melancholic shadow; the life once lived is fading quickly and the new era provides few moral compasses. The characters are fixed in place in a photograph of their lives never to appear again.

The tableau at the beginning is a photographic pose, and we in the audience are the cameramen. We are seeing a flat surface of people inert, and the whole Act is what Tom Whitaker calls the "mode of witnessing." Like a photograph, we aren't certain who is talking to whom, but we know that the people in the picture are interacting. Whitaker notes that "in their willed inattention," the people in *The Three Sisters* "experience one another as distant or nonexistent. They experience space as constriction or separation, time as not-yet or a slipping-away, the world itself as the constant threat of nothingness."<sup>315</sup> With both past and future disappearing on either side of them, the characters are trapped in a cyclical present. Andrey becomes further enmeshed in a deadening net of gambling, Masha is tangled in a hopeless love affair with the married Vershinin, the Doctor sinks into drink and nihilism, Vershinin cannot extricate himself from his unseen and offstage wife, and Natasha continually overtakes the house.

As with Chekhov's plays, characters wander through the same rooms without seeking to inhabit the same earthly planes as others; they communicate but rarely listen; and their words evaporate as quickly as their memories. In the third Act, Irina laments over all that she has lost: "(*Sobbing*) Where? Where has it all gone? Where is it? Oh, my God, my God! I've forgotten everything, forgotten ... It's all tangled up in my mind ... I can't remember the Italian for window or, uh, ceiling ... I forgot everything, every day I forget, and life goes on and won't ever, ever come back, we'll never get to Moscow ... I can see that we won't ..." (288).

In the play we have intractable "action." The oldest sister, Olga, an unmarried school teacher, the middle sister, Masha, and the youngest, Irena, speak of work, action, doing; but they seem incapable of action. Their solipsistic exchanges move from one illusion to another; listening to their speeches reveals immediately that whatever they *say* they will *not do*. The visitors, a few soldiers seeking refuge from their humdrum lives, enact a colorful amusement for the sisters, if only to prevent them from taking any action or succumbing to boredom. The refrain of "We will get to Moscow" that the sisters repeat throughout the play underscores a tepid symbol of a "better" place – as if the city's vibrancy will wash away their crippling lethargy. But, as Laurence Senelick observes, "The sisters have pinned their hopes on a regiment of straw men." Vershinin, the officer whose wife threatens suicide, and Irena's two suitors, Tusenbach and Solyony, "are carpet knights, suitable for dressing out the party, but not for salvaging anyone's life. That the sisters should make such a fuss about them reveals at once the unreality of their values."<sup>316</sup> The act ends with a photograph of hostesses and guests, but it is significant that Andrey's lover, Natasha, is not in the picture. Natasha, the philistine outsider, lacks the aristocratic upbringing of the sisters. They mock her, finding petty faults with her dress and manner. They know Natasha is trading up for Andrey to achieve elevated class and money. Throughout the play she bears children, but it is doubtful they are Andrey's; her affair with the town officer and her invasiveness make her, along with Solyony and the Professor in *Uncle Vanya*, the most odious of Chekhov's characters. Though they hardly traffic in evil, they are self-obsessed opportunists.

The play depicts three sisters assaulted by the forces of history. Like all of Chekhov's characters, their undoing is of their own making. *The Three Sisters*, Laurence Senelick contends, "does not try to show how three gifted women are defeated by a philistine environment, but rather illustrates that their unhappiness is of their own making. If they are subjugated and evicted by the Natashas of this world, it is because they have not recognized and dealt with their own shortcomings. At some point in the play, each sister is as callous and purblind as Natasha herself."<sup>317</sup> This observation is correct but one-sidedly insensitive to the play's compassion. Chekhov wants audiences to observe the wrongheaded



choices of three spoiled sisters, but there is more empathy towards them, without which the play becomes sterile. Though the three sisters indeed have shortcomings – Olga curtly criticizes Natasha's dress at an inopportune moment, Masha carries on an affair despite the havoc it wreaks on her husband, and Irina's wishy-washiness with Tusenbach carelessly leads him on, a consequence of their hubris and occasional blindness to reality – they are at root clinging to an integrity and outdated morality. They are, like Hedda Gabler, the product of their father, a military man who gave them education but not self-confidence. At the father's death, he departed from the position where he had directed their universe and its values, distinguishing good from evil, and endowed the three sisters' lives with meaning. In the absence of this supreme presence, the world is now fearsomely ambiguous; the single moral authority, like the Professor in *Uncle Vanya*, has decomposed into modernism's myriad relative morality.

The sisters' greatest mistake is not in their incidental behavior, but rather their wholesale transference of dependence from their father to their brother Andrey. Like Ivanov in Chekhov's earlier play, he is weak, succumbs to gambling addiction, and eventually is neutralized by a stronger Natasha. Chekhov portrays these sensitive sisters as having been given a fine education and upbringing but denied the one ingredient withheld from women and nurtured in men: confidence. There is a subtle yet strong underlying feminism in this play, layered into the fabric of the text without, in Chekhov's usual masterful ability, calling obvious attention to itself. The very first line sets the tone: "Father died just a year ago, this very day, the fifth of May, your saint's day, Irina" (249). The father invades the psychic actions and reactions of the sisters. Once free, they have little point of reference to guide their behavior. Andrey is the surrogate patriarch; the sisters leave the family finances to him, which he squanders fecklessly. But this is what they have been taught – that men must run the household. They cannot break through this mindset. "Father drilled us to get up at seven," Olga continues in her memory musings (252), but adds, "Nowadays, Irina wakes up at seven and stays in bed at least 'til nine, thinking about things" (252). Olga is teasing Irina, who has just pontificated about hard work. Later in the first Act we hear someone playing the violin offstage. Masha says, "That's Andrey playing, our brother," and Irina adds, "He's the scholar of the family. He's meant to be a professor. Papa was a military man, but his son chose an academic career" (257). Not much of one, it turns out. Maurice Valency calls *The Three Sisters* "the flower of impressionism in drama. No play has ever conveyed more subtly the sense of transitory nature of human life, the sadness and beauty of the passing moment."<sup>318</sup> Everything is passing the sisters by and they fail to climb aboard. Nowhere is the condition of abulia more evident than in these woefully inert sisters.

The fire in Act Three brings together the play's underlying themes. Though the event is offstage, its presence is palpably felt. The three sisters are exhausted, and virtually everyone enters with confessional statements. The fire is offstage and removed from the Prozorov house, but it creates, in Laurence Senelick's words, a "thermodynamic effect." Exhausted, drunk, and distraught, the characters pour out their feelings. "Unlike the purifying fires of Ibsen and Strindberg," Senelick says, "this blaze leaves the sisters uncleansed, as their world is rapidly being consumed."<sup>319</sup> As each character enters and confesses to one sin after another, the dialogue takes on what the Germans call *aneinander vorbei sprechen* – people talking past one another.

Northrop Frye contends that in the last Act of *The Three Sisters*, where the characters withdraw from each other into their dolorous subjective cells, "we are coming about as close to pure irony as the stage can get." The ironic play, he says, "passes through a dead center of complete realism, a pure mime representing human life without comment and without imposing any sort of dramatic form beyond what is required for simple exhibition."<sup>320</sup> By irony he means a condition where tragedy has disembarked and the sense of pure chance overtakes the human condition. Tragedy moves under the condition of myth and historical inevitability; irony functions amidst a fallen world, where action is fruitless and resignation is the only possible response. The major event of Act Four is the duel resulting in Tusenbach's death, which is offstage. Nothing is solved, no ideology prevails, and characters are left standing in the "old garden" outside their house, now run by Natasha. Literally and figuratively "ships passing in the night" – Chekhov notes in the stage directions that "*Passersby occasionally cut through the garden from the street to the river; five or so soldiers pass quickly by*" (292). The soldiers are leaving the three sisters to the "pure irony" of Frye's assessment. "Doesn't matter! Doesn't matter!," Chebutykin says, and Olga closes the play with, "If only we knew, if only we knew!" (306) Knew what? In a variant of the play, Chekhov had the body of the Baron cross the stage. But in the end this is superfluous. We are left with the irony that the sisters now know that if they had a better understanding of their lives they could have made better choices. But such wishful thinking is impossible. Chekhov makes this point when he says in a letter of 1888, "You are right to require a conscious attitude from the artist toward his work, but you mix up two ideas: the solution of the problem and a correct presentation of the problem. Only the latter is obligatory for the artist."<sup>321</sup> We can only accept that it "doesn't matter" in the end. Rufus Mathewson says that "Chekhov frees the artist from responsibilities which are, properly, not his at all, and at the same time protects him in his role as observer and organizer of experience. In the final libertarian image he surrenders any claim to legislative, parental controls over the reader's response: it is not for the artist to worry about what the work of art causes people to do."<sup>322</sup>

# *The Cherry Orchard*

Chekhov presents the cherry orchard in a kind of hyperspace where everything is alive and in flux. The images of the orchard quake; their forms unlock and relock in the present and in the memory of the characters. Monumental images tremble within their majestic solidity. The property is owned and re-owned and owned anew by the son of a serf who worked the land as a peasant. We are made aware of the pictorial plane, the language of space, the artistic hand choreographing the characters on and off the stage, dovetailing one another as they pass. Lopakhin, the descendant of serfs (*muzhik*) who has triumphed in business, successfully obtains the estate at auction. Chekhov depicts him with compassion, as he does the frivolous aristocrats whose place he is stealthily yet guiltily usurping. Francis Fergusson describes the play “as a realistic ensemble pathos: the characters all suffer the passing of the estate in different ways, thus adumbrating this change at a deeper and more generally significant level than that of any individual’s experience. The action which they all share by analogy, and which informs the suffering of the destined change of the Cherry Orchard, is ‘to save the Cherry Orchard.’”<sup>323</sup>

In the end all will depart the orchard. In dialogue epitomizing Chekhov at his best – and bearing strong comparisons to Beckett – Varya and Lopakhin, would-be lovers, are together for what will be the last effort at matrimony.

VARYA: (*Inspects the luggage for a long time*). That’s funny, I just can’t find it ...

LOPAKHIN: What are you looking for?

VARYA: I packed it myself and can’t remember.

(*Pause*)

LOPAKHIN: Where are you off to now, Varvara Mikhailovna?

VARYA: Me? To the Ragulins’ ... I’ve agreed to take charge of their household ... as a housekeeper, sort of.

LOPAKHIN: That’s in Yashnevo? About fifty miles from here.

(*Pause*)

so ends life in this house ...

VARYA: (*Examining the luggage*). Where in the world is it? ... Or maybe I packed it in the trunk ... Yes, life in this house is over ... there won’t be anymore ...

LOPAKHIN: And I’ll be riding to Kharkov soon ... by the same train. Lots of business. But I’m leaving Yepikhodov on the grounds ... I hired him.

VARYA: Is that so!

LOPAKHIN: Last year by this time, it was already snowing, if you remember, but now it’s mild, sunny. Except that it’s cold ... About three degrees of frost.

VARYA: I haven’t noticed.

(*Pause*)

And besides, our thermometer is broken ...

(*Pause*)

VOICE FROM OUTSIDE: (*Through the door*). Yermolay Alekseich!  
 LOPAKHIN: (*As if expecting this call for a long time*): Right away!  
 (368–9).

This lacuna teases us, the ambivalence and silences provoke us to wade in and ask “What is really going on here?” For instance, what is Varya “looking for?” We know the answer to this as much as we know who “Godot” is or what is in Willy Loman’s suitcase. This Beckett-like scene’s modernist void is created through ellipses, pauses, throat-clearing, triviality, and ambiguity – like looking at an Impressionist painting that at first seems to lack discernible form but on closer examination reveals details so precise and depth so profound that it is finally sharper than any photograph. It simultaneously *does and doesn’t matter what she’s looking for*: the surface patina *is and is not important*; the subtext and text jostle and collide in an emotional whirligig. “Life in this house is over,” implies the transition from aristocracy to modernism, but it also signifies the personal and sadly reflective, suggesting change both seismic and minute. This is Chekhovian dialogue lodged in the crisis of marriage and romance, cultural transitions and social upheaval, all wrapped around trivia – lost items, weather, moving, work, hesitation, split focus, and equivocation. The expectation of marriage between Lopakhin and Varya has built throughout the play, yet there is no talk of love, but rather Varya speaks about misplaced items and Lopakhin about the weather. “On the subject of marriage he is silent and Chekhov is silent,” Leslie Kane observes, revealing instead “relationship and manipulation.”<sup>324</sup> Assumed to be headed towards betrothal, Lopakhin’s act of selling the estate has overturned Varya’s life; she is now cast adrift thanks to his action, creating a resentment at odds with her desire. Their hesitations are enveloped by the complexity of the situation, ultimately blocking their union. The awkwardness and silence communicate contradictions and complexity, what Harold Pinter, whose well-known pauses are indebted to Chekhov, calls the “unsaid, and that what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rear-guard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves.” There are “two silences,” Pinter explains: “One when no words are spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it.” In this language, Pinter suggests “a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place.”<sup>325</sup> Trivia and monumentality are finely juxtaposed so that we see the surface and the depth at once – we see humans groping for words, trapped in silences that must suffice in lieu of language’s shortcomings. We are caught in limbo, a tipping point of delicacy, where everything hinges on a word, phrase, gesture, hint, pause, or reaction; that Varya and Lopakhin do not marry at this moment likely means that they will never come together; the distances they will travel will separate them forever. The pathos and humor comingle in marvelous delicacy.

Chekhov's plays make us see things differently. His work foregrounds patterns, relationships, and forces which are certainly present in our visual field but are overshadowed, made recessive by dint of their normalcy and our predictable way of apprehending things. At the risk of oversimplification, what underscores Chekhov's genius is that his characters are *alive*. They are not merely rounded; the best of them live with us, as people we know or have known. Their immense vitality reverberates in his plays, and not merely because they are skillfully drawn facets of humanity but because they dramatize the profoundest and deepest parts of our desires and doubts, the parts most conflicted and revealing the greatest risks. His characters do not embody ideologies, like Shaw's, nor do they articulate their conditions well. They tend to mumble, are shy, recalcitrant, and idiosyncratic, but above all they act like human beings whose lives are informed by values and principles, instead of just particularly shrewd and self-preserving icons. His delicate and exacting rendition of character matches his patience and humor towards their frailty. His characters are damaged and alienated, but the vivid lucidity of their experiences ensures their universality. Richard Gilman says that "Of all the writers I think him among the most readily transportable, the most able to transcend historical context and geographical limit, suffering the fewest losses along the way. And this is because I know of no writer who better exemplifies – radiates – the imperishable relationship between being and expression, the 'universality' of which doesn't need to be demonstrated."<sup>326</sup> Shakespeare, naturally, has to be considered along these lines; but Chekhov's "universality," documented by Laurence Senelick's study of Chekhov's global influence,<sup>327</sup> makes his contribution on a level unimaginable by other modern dramatists. Peter Brook observes that with Chekhov, "the text gives the impression of having been recorded on tape, of taking its sentences from daily life." Yet, there is "not a phrase of Chekhov's that has not been chiseled, polished, modified, with great skill and artistry so as to give the impression that the actor is really speaking 'like in daily life.' However, if one tries to speak and behave just like in daily life, one cannot play Chekhov. The actor and the director must [...] be aware that each word, even if it appears to be innocent, is not so. It contains in itself, and in the silence that precedes and follows it, an entire unspoken complexity of energies between characters."<sup>328</sup> The modernist tendency was to oscillate between excessive confidence in the possibility for human improvement and the callow dismissal of progress. Chekhov sat athwart this characteristic modern chasm: he eschews false hopes and teeters on the edge of nihilism; but he also nods incrementally to human endurance. Human fraternity remains fluid, malleable, fungible, rather than constitutive and certain. It is hopeless to hope, yet one hopes. Neither Chekhov's nor Beckett's characters will achieve satisfaction; still, they hang on. It is a hope that transcends illusion, a secular faith in human beings as loopy yet courageous, incorporating pasts filled with poor judgments and floundering towards a future they somehow stumble through yet endure.



# Part II

## Modernist Beginnings

*God is dead. The world broke apart. I am dynamite.*

– Hugo Ball<sup>329</sup>

From approximately 1890 to 1930, a plethora of modernist movements advanced their agendas through doctrines, pamphlets, manifestos, broadsheets, journals, newspapers, magazines as well as the artworks themselves. All were, in one form or another, dubbed *avant garde*, and in playwriting this meant opposition to mimesis and realism; seeking new methods and techniques through lighting, stage, and sound design; and creating new language to express alternatives. The playwrights were largely radically inclined intellectual trouble-makers who sought to break down the hierarchies of politics and theorized about how abandoning traditional aesthetics could imbue theatre with new meaning. From every artistic enclave, playwrights and players looked for new methods to coincide with a new spirit of modernism. If art, music, and literature were breaking free of convention, then theatre and drama must do likewise.

Of the many modernist “isms” that permeated the times, the two most widely considered and popularly applied were Expressionism and Symbolism. Dadaism, Surrealism, Futurism, and Constructivism, to name just a few, were significant; but by and large their ideas either folded into these two broadly construed concepts or lost their momentum and made minimum impact. This is not to suggest hegemony or uniformity in all of the plays; each artist sought individual expression and the catch-all “genres” are primarily academic categorizations. But the aggregation of Expressionism and Symbolism carried international weight; playwrights found their themes grist for their creative mills. These modernists shared the underlying theme of a culture obsessed with the “new.”

While this “newness” was an attempt to liberate the artist from convention, Expressionism and Symbolism still owed much to the Romantics, whose emphasis on enchantment, folk tales, mysticism, dynamic-exuberant expression played out in Expressionistic and Symbolic plays. Expressionism and Symbolism simply shifted emphasis from Romanticism’s individual as a whole and creative being to the individual divided, ruptured, and dispersed. This resulted from Einstein’s deconstruction of time and space, the advent of Cubism, and the rise of musical dissonance. The de-centering of the subject stressed subjectivity as the Romantics would have it, but, owing to Strindberg, no longer found the subject the arbiter of a singular perspective. De-centering was not the alternative to Romantic inwardness, but rather the logical extension of it: the self was still the source of creativity, but an unreliable source, raising doubt and destabilization – “alienation” being the common description. Charles Taylor argues that the modern deconstruction of the self is the flip side of the same Romantic coin: “The old Romantic aspiration to overcome fragmentation, to break down the repressive barriers between unconscious and conscious, irrational and rational, imagination and reason, recurs. But unlike with the great Romantics, the goal was not so much a synthesis in difference as a merging of the separated rational ego into the deeper flux.”<sup>330</sup>

Playwrights sought to break the logical coherence of the world, which led to gaps and breaches in perception. Modernist ideas, James Clifford notes, took as their “problem – and opportunity – the fragmentation and juxtaposition of cultural values.”<sup>331</sup> The point was to enlarge the scope of possible appearances and split the world into alternative versions. Audiences, used to viewing the realistic descriptions of everyday events schematically, abruptly suspended the obvious evidence of things, unfolding a deeper, transcendental truth beyond the boundaries of the ordinary. Modern Expressionism and Symbolism comprised challenges to monistic theories of truth and surface reality presented as “facts.” Daniel Gerould’s description of Symbolism can just as easily describe Expressionism: “In striving to put on stage what common sense declared to be non-dramatic and undramatizable, the symbolists liberated playwriting from mechanistic notions of chronological time and Euclidian space, and they enlarged the frame of drama to include other worlds and other beings than those inhabiting the bourgeois theatre.” Borrowing from Strindberg’s split personalities within individuals, symbolist drama, Gerould remarks, “would be multiple, fluid, polyvalent, a point of departure for imaginary voyages into uncharted regions.”<sup>332</sup> The disdain for materialism and positivism added to the avant garde’s yearning for a dismantling of surfaces and a probative inquiry into the strange and veiled worlds of the soul. Symbolism and Expressionism were paradoxically ideologies of hope and despair, providing positive responses to alienation and modern technology, while simultaneously offering ideologies of futility in the face of industrialization and technological progress.



Although they had a concomitant disdain for the bourgeoisie, the fundamental difference between Expressionism and Symbolism is the way they expressed their art. The former emphasized rebellion, stridency, incongruity, harshness, alienation, disharmony, physicality, staccato language, and extremity; the latter subtlety, nuance, harmony, spirituality, mysticism, poetry, and organicity. Expressionism was primarily German and American, Symbolism French, Irish, Russian, and Indian (though there were notable exceptions and additions); and both endured by folding into the fabric of modern drama.

Expressionism, wrote Paul Raabe, was “atmosphere, movement, vivacity.”<sup>333</sup> It rejected the scientific representation of naturalism, replacing it with an outward appearance of impressions, or *Jugendstil* (*Art Nouveau*), in an effort to evoke a reality beyond the realm of the rational. Its key German playwrights Ernst Toller (1893–1939), Walter Hasenclever (1890–1950), Reinhard Sorge (1892–1916), and Georg Kaiser (1878–1945) sought to distort reality as a way of gaining access to the inner vision of the work. They built their plays on Freudian notions of the subconscious; Nietzschean ideas of ritualistic-Dionysian bacchanal; and Henri Bergson’s emphasis on intuitive vitality and subjectivity over intellectualism and objectivity. “What matters is the transformation of energy,” asserts Expressionist Ludwig Rubiner; “Transformation of inner images into public facts, lines of force erupt into view, stage backdrops are overturned, spaces becomes visible,” and “new abodes of thought” appear “until the next catastrophe.”<sup>334</sup> It was a reaction against authoritarianism, capitalism, industrialism, the mechanism of modern life, Taylorism (assembly-line efficiency), the hollowness of late-nineteenth-century bourgeois Victorianism, and (especially in Germany) the jingoism and carnage of the First World War. Painters Georg Groetz, Wassily Kandinsky, Ernst Kirchner, Oskar Kokoschka, Max Beckman, Marc Chagall, and Egon Schiele, to name the most prominent, expressed the helplessness of human beings against war’s machinery. In Grosz’s painting *Republican Automaton* (1920), for example, men are faceless machines, clanking and whirring mechanical flags.

The unidentifiable men in Grosz’s painting on the next page are legless and armless, victims of World War I, yet remain antediluvian, flag-waving patriots. For Grosz and other Expressionists, the world had lost its bearings, where humans, capable of inflicting barbarous cruelty on each other, are reduced to the basest instincts and knee-jerk loyalty. The sentimental romanticism of nineteenth-century Germany that provoked Kaiser-worship and nationalism turns abruptly into the art of a deliberately anti-romanticist Weimar Germany.

The Expressionist artists formed loose collectives, such as *Die Brücke* (The Bridge) in Dresden and *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider) in Munich, and drew their inspiration from the French *Fauves* Movement (The Wild Beasts) during the first decade of the twentieth century. Films such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919) and Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) revealed stark shadows



Grosz, *Republican Automatons* (1920)

and extreme facial expressions. Expressionism contained the aspirations and idealism of the nineteenth century's prosaic world of urban life; but it was also colored by an ironic self-awareness of urban limitations. Expressionists, writes Peter Gay, "lived off the city, responding to it as a devouring monster, a trigger for the widest fantasies, an unsurpassed stage for love and loneliness."<sup>335</sup> Strindberg paved the foundation for Expressionist drama: *Stationendrama* (locales at different "stations") broke up the realistic parlor scene; emphasis on heightened emotionalism manifested in the *Schreidrama* (*cri du coeur*); and stress on the primacy of the individual against the herd – all derivative of Strindberg. This last point was also the result of *Der Neue Mensch* (The New Man), a movement that would resist the encroachment of modern pressures through a call of universal brotherhood. This brotherhood was not, however, an attempt towards conformity, but rather a desire to unite against the increasing mechanization and robotization of modern life. Kurt Pinthus wrote that Expressionism "produces its means of expression with forcefulness and violent energy through the power of the spirit (and it doesn't care about avoiding their misuses). It hurls forth its world in ecstatic paroxysms, in

tortured sorrow, in the sweetest musical song, in the simultaneity of crisscrossing emotions, in the chaotic smashing of language, in the most gruesome derision of failed human existence, in flagellation, shrieking, enraptured longing for God and the good, for love and fraternity.”<sup>336</sup>

Expressionist dramas tended to use lengthy (often shrill) monologues, staccato utterances, unconventional syntax, and an admixture of dance, pantomime, and abstract staging. In Expressionism, Walter Sokel writes, “We witness bizarre events.”<sup>337</sup> Disjointed language, disruptive narratives, and distorted stage settings were its signatory features. Set designs frequently utilized post-Impressionism (Cézanne) and Cubist-like styles, with landscapes of blocks, cylinders, and cones. The best of these designers, Adolph Appia and Gordon Craig, used lighting effectively to create crepuscular images, penumbra backdrops, and stark moods. Appia, Craig, and others were aided by new technologies in stage lighting that highlighted the journey of the protagonist. This was especially significant because for the most part the protagonists of Expressionism were journey-bound; often youthful (Expressionism was a very youth-oriented movement), the plays were educational journeys in the mode of *Bildungsroman* (educational novels of the eighteenth century) – only with additional heightened expressiveness. The protagonists appeared as the soul of humanity, being the epicenter of inner reality that reflected the total human experience. The *Ich-Dramen* (ego, or I-dramas), as they were called, stressed the protagonist’s struggle against external forces, often a Freudian assertion of youthful exuberance against parental restraint (Walter Hasenclever’s *The Son*, for example). Expressionist drama, wrote Rudolf Kayser, “hurls forth from the ego (*Ich*); it confesses and takes sides.” Additionally, “The world is neither copied nor ‘formed,’ but created from intense interiority.”<sup>338</sup> Their aims demonstrated interior truths, not through psychological analysis or representation, but by observing aspirations and fears made by the intrepid hero’s sojourns and experiences. In order to capture the universality, characters were often stereotypes (Father, Doctor, etc.) rather than individuals. Expressionism challenged the unity of time, place, and action, focusing instead on an open structure where the sense of time is dream-like, place is frequently nightmarish, opulent, and stark, and the action less concerned with intrigue than with peeling away the layers of social convention. Finally, like their counterpart contemporary artists, the Expressionist playwrights were drawn to “primitivism” – the fashionable spirit of African art that ricocheted throughout Europe. Plays were presented at a feverish pitch: the volume was turned up, the action frenetic, and the pace accelerated. The Expressionist artist, writes Edschmid Kasimir, “does not see, he shouts. He does not describe, he experiences.”<sup>339</sup> This shout was unsustainable; the energy required to create Expressionist dramas was quickly exhausted. As Richard Murphy explains, Expressionists “unleashed their most private emotions in their texts and open up their

personality to the point of excess. Yet although initially shocking and arresting, the full force of these powerful effects cannot be sustained for long. The novelty-value rapidly fades, and any attempt to repeat this effect necessarily involves trying to raise the emotional voltage still further in order to repeat the shock. This ends inevitably in hollow rhetoric and mere artifice.”<sup>340</sup> The best of Expressionism folded into realism – Eugene O’Neill and Arthur Miller, to name a sample of playwrights who profited from this form.

If Expressionism was strident, Symbolism was muted. It, like Expressionism, aspired to be what Bert Cardullo calls “a total spectacle encompassing all of life,”<sup>341</sup> but with softer shading and greater melancholy. Poetry over asperity, opaque over angular images, stillness and silence over abrasiveness and hysteria were Symbolist benchmarks. It toned down the histrionics and hyperbole of melodrama, emphasizing stasis and subtlety. The archetypal Symbolist drama displays mysticism, oneiric language and images, and correlative-introspective poetics. Everything depends on the selected symbol and a symbol, writes one of its main proponents William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), is “the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame.” Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949), another Symbolist, adds that onstage “we have far fewer extraordinary and violent adventures.”<sup>342</sup>

Yeats, Maeterlinck, and the Symbolists looked to convey the subconscious. There was no “straining after realism,” observes Frank Kermode, but rather a search for the “Romantic Image.”<sup>343</sup> They sought an appreciation of the symbol-making gesture of human beings; if animals are immersed in the immediacy of their world with no thought beyond the here and now, humanity is capable of symbolic form either through myth, language, or dreams – in order to reveal passion, authenticity, and relationships. External phenomena are symbols of a deeper system of ideas; while the realists were content to describe the symbolic relationship between the thing and the representation for its own sake, the Symbolists wanted to perceive the lacunae existing in the interstices between sign and phenomena, fleshing out the collective unconscious along the lines of a Wagnerian legend. According to Günter Berghaus, the “symbolists sought to penetrate the world of appearances and to apprehend essential truths underneath the material surface of reality, especially in the spiritual and psychic realms. They wanted to open the doors of perception to the mystical and sublime, to fathom the divine essence of Being, and to invigorate the spiritual faculties that had withered in the aftermath of industrial and scientific revolutions.”<sup>344</sup> In order to penetrate this interiority, the Symbolists used dreams, fantasies, and other imaginative methods that expressed the inexpressible through their key utility: the symbol. “At the center of the symbolist poetics,” Frantisek Deak contends, “is the notion of poetry as an evocation of a hidden reality through symbolic means. The poet discovers the relationship among things, their correspondences, and evokes them with

the use of symbols or other literary devices.”<sup>345</sup> The Symbolists demanded a fragmentary rational consciousnesses, stimulating a vertigo not unlike that of the Surrealist André Breton, who called for a “vertiginous descent into ourselves” (*la descente, vertigineuse en nous*),<sup>346</sup> whereby the performance would accentuate vagary in the likeness of dreams.

To understand the modernist avant garde, we need to examine the process of creation of the art object by these movements’ artists during the late nineteenth century. Gianni Vattimo notes that during this period “artists began to feel the first massive effects of the industrial revolution.” This transformation, he says, “basically comes down to one meaning: the loss of direct contact with a restricted and well-known public, and the acquisition of a much wider public, albeit unknown and far removed.” This distancing helped shape the Romantic artist, who is “an artist abandoned to himself, who generally has no commissioner in the traditional sense of the term; who has no specific, precise, or given demands to which he must respond; and who must seek solely within himself, in his own personality, the inspiration, the source, and rules of his own art.”<sup>347</sup> As a consequence, the relationship of theatre and drama to the spectator fractures: the one-to-one relationship of events onstage to the world, largely utilized in the process of mimesis, loses its grip for the modernist avant garde. Instead of artworks recognizable to something occurring “in real life” because life is unified, artworks now occur within a new system of language, image, and meaning; to encounter the work the spectator has to view it, in Vattimo’s words, like “encountering” a new person who “cannot be merely set into the world as it is.” Rather the artwork “represents a new perspective, a new proposal to arrange the world in a different manner.” Seeing a new person means creating meaning in the moment and not from a pre-existing past; it means immediate assessments and wonder, rather than pre-formulated experiences and knowledge. The work of art should be read “as prophecy, as a point of departure rather than a point of arrival.”<sup>348</sup> For Vattimo it comes down to two alternative ways of seeing art: the Aristotelian conception of mimesis, where we enter the theatre with the specific purpose of seeing a world already pre-given in reality and learn to interpret that world more keenly through the play’s moral compass and interpersonal relationships; or a Kantian conception of aesthetic free play, where the event we witness cannot be derived or comprehended by pre-existing situations, but instead is taken for what it is – fresh and original. Entering the theatre consigned to the Aristotelian view means confronting the circumstances onstage as a concomitant connection to history, to a progressive and linear belief that the unfolding events are time-related, where a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end is a parallel universe to our world, and that a progressive grasp of consciousness aids the spectator in a historical overview and comprehension. We learn from the play’s progression to absorb the sociological, psychological, and political events

outside the drama by the mental-associative one-to-one process. But, as Nietzsche and Heidegger demonstrate, such thinking leads merely to a Hegelian “world-process” – a progressive-teleological movement that, in their view, merely repeats itself and fails to produce anything novel. In place of “spiritual powers,” says Nietzsche, the unfolding of history is merely the “sole sovereign power.”<sup>349</sup> Put another way, Heidegger contends that “long-familiar mode of thought preconceives all immediate experience of beings. The preconception shackles reflection on the being of any given entity.”<sup>350</sup> By contrast, the avant garde encourages a purely aesthetic relationship; we see art spontaneously, open to the immediacy of experience. Reality is false, as Richard Sheppard notes, so that the modernists of the period “have a developed sense that reality is not reality as perceived and structured by the Western bourgeois consciousness.” They sensed instead that behind reality conventionally understood, “there lies a realm full of dynamic energies whose patterns are alien to liberal humanist or classical notions of order, and which, to the extent that they exist at all, are elusive and mysterious.”<sup>351</sup> To derive the essences of these dynamic energies meant a restructuring of the artistic experience.

# Chapter 5

## Rising Symbolism

“As far as I’m concerned,” wrote the Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, “the situation of a poet, in this society which does not allow him to live, is that of a man who isolates himself to sculpt his own tomb.”<sup>352</sup> Isolated, indeed, for Mallarmé’s interiority led him to the “drama of the book” (*Le Livre*), a kind of Wagnerian “total work of art” for private viewing. Though Maeterlinck and Yeats were deeply influenced by Mallarmé, they remained invested in the word and the actor onstage, even if spoken by marionettes. Katherine Worth maintains that for Symbolists like Maeterlinck and Yeats, “going down into the depth of the mind meant also reaching out, making contact with the mystery of the universe, galvanizing into active life the part of the mind that dreams and is passive and has intuitive knowledge the conscious mind is blind to.”<sup>353</sup> Blindness (darkness) and light were the dialectical balancing act that defined one of the main tenets of Symbolism. Vision itself is part of a long tradition in Western philosophy; Martin Jay writes that the development of Western philosophy cannot be understood “without attending to its habitual dependence on visual metaphors of one sort or another. From the shadows playing on the walls of Plato’s cave and Augustine’s praise of the divine light to Descartes’s ideas available to a ‘steadfast mental gaze’ and the Enlightenment’s faith in the data of our senses, the ocularcentric underpinnings of our philosophical tradition have been undeniably pervasive.”<sup>354</sup>

Alfred Jarry’s 1896 production of his sophomoric play, *Ubu Roi* (*King Ubu*), is generally the agreed upon launching point for Symbolist drama. It is, however, hardly the first of such plays and, as Arthur Symons points out, this “comédie guignolesque” is “of little importance itself,” though it is “of considerable importance as a symptom of tendencies now agitating the minds of the younger generation in France.” Jarry’s satire of royalty and authority – and its famous

first word “*merdre*” (a made-up word translated as “shitter”) – provocatively stirred up the precocious anti-establishment. Symons called the play “the crudity of a schoolboy,” but it created a sensation with its “symbolic buffoonery” meant “to satirize humanity by setting human beings to play the part of marionettes, hiding their faces behind cardboard masks, tuning voices to a howl and a squeak which tradition has considerably assigned to the voices of that wooden world, and mimicking the rigid inflexibility and spasmodic life of puppets by a hopping and reeling gait.”<sup>355</sup> Despite its puerility, the play’s target – middle-class pretensions – represented a cool observer judging grown-ups with the severity of a kangaroo court. It also assisted in ushering in a new conception of drama opposed to the well-made play tradition. Its send-up of the holy-Ibsen-like “drama of ideas” led Lionel Abel to remark that had it not been for dramatists like Ibsen, the whole edifice of modern drama would have rejected the “wrong belief” that “without the Greek metaphysic the form of tragedy was possible and valid.”<sup>356</sup> The tragic form based on Attic mimesis and catharsis – reproducibility of reality and the narrative of an individual’s fall – inhibited modern drama, Abel claims, undermining the trajectory of its newly invented farce and metatheatre – a theatre that calls attention to itself. Along similar lines, Arthur Symons wrote in 1909 that Maeterlinck’s “theatre of marionettes, who are at the same time children and spirits, at once more simple and more abstract than real people, is the reaction of the imagination against the wholly prose theatre of Ibsen, into which life comes nakedly, cruelly, subtly, but without distinction, without poetry. Maeterlinck has invented plays which are pictures, in which the crudity of action is subdued into misty outlines.”<sup>357</sup>

The Belgium-born Maurice Maeterlinck was a poet, theorist, playwright, and Nobel prizewinner (1911) whose major plays were *The Intruder* (1890), *The Blind* (1890), *Pelléas and Mélisande* (1892), *Interior* (1894), and *The Blue Bird* (1908). For Maeterlinck, realism’s bankruptcy resides in its assumption that truth is revealed when the struggles of the protagonist are developed in the Hegelian notion of conflict in action. For Hegel, modern dramas avoid the tragic flaw that disfigures and brings down the protagonist; instead, social conflicts are drama’s pre-eminence. Hegel was interested in the collision of incommensurable wills between humanity and institutions, family versus family (*Antigone* was his prime example), or other socio-political contrasts. Once the colliding purposes transpire, drama exposes the residual hypocrisy of institutions, people, or authoritarian regimes. The dialectical clash of one-sidedness constitutes the grounds for tragedy; in Peter Szondi’s words, in Hegel “the tragic and the dialectic coincide.”<sup>358</sup> Maeterlinck thought otherwise; for him drama was not tied to “conflict” as much as it was rooted in what Szondi calls “existential powerlessness,” where “a single moment is dealt with – the moment when a helpless human being is overtaken by fate.” This is not, however, the fate of the Romantics, where human beings are tossed hither and yon by the



feckless forces of chance. Rather for Maeterlinck, Szondi says, “human destiny is represented by death itself, and death alone dominates the stage in his works.” In this sense the category of action so essential for Hegel (and Hegel’s best practitioners, Ibsen and Shaw) is “replaced by ‘situation.’”<sup>359</sup> Maeterlinck’s coinage of *drame statique* (static drama) and *le tragique quotidien* (tragedy of the everyday) erases action from the dramaturgical equation; passivity, stillness, and awaiting death or the report of death are all that occurs.

In Maeterlinck traditional reflections of “life” are not optical certainties. The whole occasion of Western philosophy relying on the notions of “mirror,” “window,” “frame,” etc., are not for him methods of transparency or sources of information about the world. The optical emphasis indelibly etched into Western conceptions of mimesis is at best a tool for reading deeper symbols. Events onstage merely unfold different paradigms – codes that should be read in this manner, rather than fostering nostalgia for truth, certainty, humanity, God, etc. In realism what we apparently see onstage is only an object, figure, or conventionalized picture of reality which tries in vain to erase its own artificiality – it tries to pretend it is the “truth” when in fact it is artifice. The theatrical procedure of realism is based on the optical fallacy of “seeing” the truth. In Kantian terms, we only see appearances, not the thing-in-itself; any suggestion otherwise is illusory. Instead, we have what Maeterlinck calls “the terrible unknown.” Modern drama, he says, is now “Incapable of outside movement, deprived of external ornament, daring no longer to make serious appeal to a determined divinity or fatality, it has fallen back on itself, and seeks to discover, in the regions of psychology and of moral problems, the equivalent of what once was offered by exterior life.”<sup>360</sup> Maeterlinck blamed Ibsen (though generously acknowledging Ibsen’s talent) for setting modern drama off course. Instead of Hegelian action and conflict, interiority and contemplation should reign; instead of history and linear trajectory, a sense of multiple sources and congeries of unseen energy should permeate modern drama. Words, too, offer only surface manifestations; silence, for Maeterlinck, “is the element in which this mystical communion takes place,” writes May Daniels: “As the universal spirit is hidden deep, it can be perceived only when the superficialities of everyday life are laid aside,” and “Human speech is regarded as one of these superficialities.”<sup>361</sup> The aim of drama is to crack open the congealed, homogenous surface of the given world and accept the mystery and opacity of its interstices. In order to accomplish this, Maeterlinck (likewise Yeats) sought what Paul de Man calls a “poetization” of human experience, where the poetic image “becomes a close verbal approximation to what perception and sensation are actually like” and “a vital source for theoretical psychology, rather than a minor part of it.”<sup>362</sup> Symbols best reveal another way towards authenticity and the true encounter of the world. Poetic-symbolic language liberates words and gestures from the fixed corset of labels and action, opening multiple possibilities of meaning.

In Maeterlinck's *The Intruder*, vision and perception are the guiding metaphors. In one, brief Act, a family awaits the death of the matriarch. The Grandfather, blind (blindness is an essential symbol), apprehends the death amidst the denial of others. He "sees" it, while no one else can. The dying daughter, in an adjacent room, is being attended to by nurses and doctors. The family tries to reassure the Grandfather that his daughter and their mother will survive, but death – the symbolic intruder – lurks ominously in the Grandfather's mind. He "sees" and "hears" the hovering presence of death, and his mind races with the thoughts and images of her demise: "I have not seen my daughter for a very long time! ... I held her hands yesterday evening, but I could not see her! ... I do not know what has happened to her ... I do not know what she looks like ... I do not know what her face is like anymore [...]. This is not living! ... You sit there, all of you, with eyes wide open looking into my dead eyes, and not one of you feels any pity!"<sup>363</sup>

Maeterlinck's plays are like a tuning fork of emotional reverberation; they convey a synergy with the audience, a kind of musical undertone seeking to appeal to an internal state. To create this, Maeterlinck attenuates simultaneously to a surface reality and a parallel inner condition. Frantisek Deak called Maeterlinck's *Interior* "a play in which the visible and invisible world existed side by side."<sup>364</sup> The juxtaposition demarcates for Maeterlinck the world of appearances and the interior world of the soul. As in *The Intruder*, death hovers over stable relationships as an interior force. A family is about to be informed of a daughter who drowned herself; again, an Old Man, like the Grandfather, observes the everyday-ness of the family as yet unaware of the impending catastrophe. The Stranger and the Old Man contemplate the best timing when to tell the family; their anxiety moves them to action yet halts their ability to speak. We see the family, but through a kind of miasma, where the visible is only faintly illuminated. When the Old Man meets his granddaughter, Mary, she urges him towards restraint: "Have pity on them, grandfather ...," to which the Old Man replies, "We have pity on them, my child, but no one has pity on us." She implores him to "Tell them tomorrow, grandfather; tell them when it is light, then they will not be so sad."<sup>365</sup> Following Schopenhauer's notion that we are creatures who can conceive of death in the abstract, exponents of Symbolism like Maeterlinck believed we can, at best, try to understand the structures of our failures to know, to connect with death, and to make meaning of the drama cohere with death's "fact of life." It is not hard to understand Maeterlinck's appeal to Chekhov, who called his work "odd wonderful plays" which "make an enormous impression." As Laurence Senelick contends, "Chekhov disparaged the symbolists' metaphysical pretensions," but he was "not disdainful of their literary experimentation."<sup>366</sup>

"The problem of existence," writes Maeterlinck, "was answered only by the enigma of annihilation."<sup>367</sup> The silent elder man or woman gazing outwardly

and ruminating inwardly would have its culmination in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* decades later. The silences and surds, too, would find their way into the plays of Harold Pinter. In Maeterlinck's dramas, Katherine Worth notes, "'not knowing,' 'not remembering,' 'not saying' become vital modes of expression."<sup>368</sup> Language for Maeterlinck is incapable of expressing shock or trauma; instead he looked to the lone figure onstage experiencing unattainable longings and existential angst. In Maeterlinck's words, "There is a tragic element in the life of every day that is far more real, far more penetrating, far more akin to the true self that is in us than the tragedy that lies in great adventure."<sup>369</sup> Maeterlinck searched to reveal the trauma of death and human existence, where the term "trauma" itself moves from its unambiguous external concept of physical wound to what was to become a modernist understanding in the late nineteenth century: trauma as an interior, psychic injury, more spiritual than physical, or what William James called in 1894 a "thorn in the spirit."<sup>370</sup> The injuries in Symbolist plays are not associative seismic acts of violence, but rather internal destruction damaging the psyche, psychological blows manifested primarily in blindness, death, and existential angst. Human wounds are to be conceived symbolically, not literally, giving new meaning to the tragic experience.

For Maeterlinck and the Symbolists, death is not occasion for lessons learned (as it is in melodrama), but a finality in itself. Death, Martin Heidegger maintains, "does not reveal itself as a loss, but as a loss experienced by those remaining behind." Because we "do not experience the dying of others in a genuine sense," death is therefore "always essentially my own."<sup>371</sup> The Old Man in Maeterlinck's *Interior* conveys in Heideggerian terms the existential loneliness and isolation of the human spirit in its oneiric cage; he can "see" the events as we, the audience, see them, but he cannot alter them:

I am nearly eight-three years old, and this is the first time that the reality of life has come home to me. I do not know why all they do appears to me so strange and solemn. There they sit awaiting the night, simply, under their lamp, as we should under our own; and yet I seem to see them from an altitude of another world, because I know a little fact which as yet they do not know ... Is it so, my children? [...] And even if nothing has happened, it would frighten me to see them sit there so peacefully. They have too much confidence in the world. There they sit, separated from the enemy by only a few poor panes of glass. They think that nothing will happen because they have closed their doors, and they do not know that it is in the soul that things always happen, and that the world does not end at their house-door. ... (51).

The Old Man's bird's eye view of the world is not so much a philosophic fool-on-the-hill as it is a lamentation, similar to Greek tragedy, to be almost sung rather than spoken. Maeterlinck emphasizes the articulate and inarticulate

utterances of the lamentation at the expense of *logos* (reason), the lyrical at the expense of conflict, and the Nietzschean divide of Dionysus and Apollo (passion and stillness, as Maeterlinck might interpret it) at the expense of a rational clash of wills. The enemy is death, the ubiquitous symbol, and the doors represent bourgeois security. More importantly, the Old Man's perception of death is nested in its lack of presence, in the fact that death, as Heidegger reminds us, is a loss experienced only by the living – the dying need not appear onstage. To a European theatre immersed in melodrama thickened by the hurly-burly actions of protagonists searching for truth and the hyperbole of characters teasingly suicidal in our presence, Maeterlinck's plays were disarmingly passive, a retreat from Hegelian progressive momentum for action, and for Maeterlinck steeped in passivity, quietism, and skepticism.

If Maeterlinck tends to be grim, William Butler Yeats infused brighter language and nationalist (Irish) politics into his Symbolism. Yeats was not only a Symbolist poet and dramatist, he was, along with Lady Gregory, the catalyst for an Irish theatre movement. His development of the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899, the Irish National Theatre Society in 1902, and the Abbey Theatre in 1904 was central to the creation of an Irish national theatre. His combination of political activism, with its external and outward approach to his plays, introspective poetry, and intense spiritualism (he believed in reincarnation), marked his work. James Flannery contends that Yeats's internal conflicts can be summarized as "the struggle between lyric instinct and histrionic temperament."<sup>372</sup> Seeking a way to formalize his dramas, he looked partially to the Japanese Nōh theatre, a fourteenth-century lyrical court drama that became Japan's major national theatre by the seventeenth century. Ezra Pound introduced Yeats to Nōh and according to Yeats, "with the help of Japanese plays, [...] I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect, and symbolic, and having no need of mob or Press to pay its way – an aristocratic form."<sup>373</sup> Yeats (Nobel Prize in 1923) spent much of his artistic life in the theatre seeking to transform pedestrian realism into heightened lyricism; he wanted Ireland to usher in a nobler drama that those found in Europe, though he also wanted a drama appealing to the "peasant" class; and his goals in this manner combined masks, dance, and stylized gesture to the poetic words. His dramas fused Jungian emblematic archetypes couched in the conflicts of youth versus age, or ruler versus ruled. Though he sought an organic unity in his poetry and dramas, his language was essentially, in Paul de Man's words, "determined by an intent which uses language and in which language is deeply involved, but which nevertheless finds its ultimate justification in a meta-logical and, at times, anti-logical realm."<sup>374</sup> His muse of poetry led Yeats down an esoteric path, where dance, music, mask, and gesture combine with words to create creation itself, or, as F. L. Lucas observes, "Yeats wanted a symbolic mythology as background and framework for his writing" so intensely that, at

times, “Yeats’s symbols seem to have become more important to him in themselves than for what they symbolized.”<sup>375</sup> His *At the Hawk’s Well* (1916), for example, concerns the conflict of a young and old man over a well protected by hawks. The well’s symbol is endless: it can mean eternal youth, knowledge of life, or a host of other ideas. The old man has waited fifty years by the well for the waters of immortality and other benefits. The symbol of the well-guardians, Natalie Crohn Schmitt remarks, “were common both in fact and in mythology. Most common among the supernatural guardians were ghostly women in white and, after that, fairies. Such fairies, who had been described to Yeats and Lady Gregory, were in control of the well’s powers and could cure illness and grant wishes.”<sup>376</sup> The well symbolizes, moreover, artistry, power, strength, and eternal youth, yet it is also a place “where nothing thrives.” The young man Cuchulain, an Irish mythic character of the Ulster Cycle, enters seeking the well where the Old Man waits. He warns Cuchulain that the Guardians of the Well, albeit invisible, may attempt to deter him. Likewise Maeterlinck, vision plays an important role in Yeats’s symbolism, but it is a vision of what Martin Puchner calls “diegetic narrators,”<sup>377</sup> the sense that we are not seeing a mirrored reflection of life but rather what is actually onstage.

YOUNG MAN: But there is no well.  
 OLD MAN: Can you see nothing yonder?  
 YOUNG MAN: I but see  
 A hollow among stones half full of leaves.<sup>378</sup>

Yeats, Maeterlinck, and the bulk of Symbolist dramas are seeking something new and modern in tragedy. Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet remark that from a dramatic and tragic point of view, “there are two aspects to action. It involves on the one hand reflection, weighing up the pros and cons foreseeing as accurately as possible the means and the ends; on the other, placing one’s stake on what is unknown and incomprehensible, risking oneself in the terrain that remains impenetrable, entering into a game with supernatural forces, not knowing whether, as they join with one, they will bring success or doom.” Even precise, carefully considered actions supply no reassuring guarantees of knowledge from the experience once the drama ends. “So long as there has been no complete consummation,” they note, “human affairs remain enigmas that are more obscure the more the actors believe themselves sure of what they are doing and what they are.”<sup>379</sup> The enigmatic for Yeats merged with the notion of Irish folk tales, informing his characteristic model of Celtic art. For him, “all ancient peoples delight in tales that end in death and parting, as modern peoples delight in tales that end in marriage bells; and made all ancient peoples, who, like the old Irish, had a nature more

lyrical than dramatic, delighted in wild and beautiful lamentations.” Death for Yeats, likewise Maeterlinck, evokes a melancholy when we are “face to face with Nature” – when we commune with the “mournfulness of being born and of dying.”<sup>380</sup> Yeats’s modernism has as much to do with language and ritual as it does with the connections to the past: “The theatre began in ritual,” he insists, “and it cannot come to its greatness again without recalling words to their ancient sovereignty.”<sup>381</sup>

The symbolic bonding of ritual and language that ramifies throughout Yeats’s plays led him to recognize a kindred spirit in the great Indian playwright Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). Their friendship had its ups and downs, but ever since Yeats wrote the introduction to Tagore’s play *The Post Office* (1912), they shared a meaningful creative link. According to Harold Hurwitz, Yeats was inspired by Tagore’s focus on an “unbroken civilization where the artist was in harmony with his culture and where his works represented the true spirit of his country, a spirit that found its outlet in the voice of its poets.” The idea of a unified folk culture appealed to Yeats; it was one of the key reasons why he established the Abbey, and why Tagore’s “school theatre” in India appealed to him as well. Hurwitz notes that both Yeats and Tagore “were romantic by nature, both idealists, and both mystics (though Yeats’s mysticism was closer to occultism).” Their similarities extended socially and politically as well: “Yeats was a Protestant in Catholic Ireland, and Tagore was a member of the liberal *Brahmo Samaj* in traditionally Hindu India. Both belonged to families that were distinguished and aristocratic, and that had long been associated with national movements for freedom and independence. There was also a great deal of similarity in the Celtic view of life that Yeats held and the Indian philosophy that Tagore grew up with, particularly their belief in a reincarnation.”<sup>382</sup>

Rabindranath Tagore’s prodigious authorship led to a Nobel prize in 1913, the first non-Westerner to receive the award. According to Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker, the internationally celebrated Tagore “wrote more than sixty plays between 1881 and 1938, staged most of them at his family estate in Jorasanko (Calcutta) or the school he founded at Shantiniketan, and acted or recited various roles in them himself until well into the 1930s.”<sup>383</sup> One of his earliest plays, *Karna and Kunti* (1899), demonstrates the kind of drama appealing to Yeatsian Symbolism. A one-act, two-character drama of a reunion between mother and son, the play considers the unity of souls. The mother, Kunti, abandoned her son, Karna, and is now wracked with guilt. The play is based on an episode in the Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata* and is enriched by its simplicity and sentiment. Karna was raised by a warring charioteer and rival of his mother. In keeping with Tagore’s symbolism, the meeting is intensely passionate yet de-emphasizing melodramatic flourishing.

- KARNA: Fortunate mother of five brave kings, where can you find a place for me, a small chieftain of lowly descent?
- KUNTI: Your place is before all my other sons.
- KARNA: But what right have I to take it?
- KUNTI: Your own God-given right to your mother's love.<sup>384</sup>

Tagore's plays, writes Anada Lal, employ a "musical quality suffused with a characteristic spiritual feeling and the aura of benevolent natural surroundings" that "recall Indian precedents such as the classical Sanskrit drama or the Bengali folk theatre, both of which we know affected Tagore deeply." Though he read Western literature copiously (especially Shakespeare), Tagore's plays "dramatize the inner quest for fulfillment in man through union with the universe: quite the opposite of mainstream Western dramaturgy which, generally speaking, emphasises the individuality of man in conflict with the physical world, on a realistic and psychological level."<sup>385</sup> There is certainly much truth to this; however, Tagore did not completely forsake the individual and his quest for material freedom. His works resonated in common with Yeats's symbolism and both rejected Western consumerism, but Tagore's characters are not immune to individuality. "All our spiritual teachers," Tagore says, "have proclaimed the infinite worth of the individual. It is the rampant materialism of the present age which ruthlessly sacrifices individuals to the bloodthirsty idols of organizations."<sup>386</sup> For Tagore and Yeats, the individual is among the wider expanses of the community, an ebb and flow of oneness within and without the culture, what Avishai Margalit has called the "ethics of memory,"<sup>387</sup> where communities are made and remade through shared collective memories and obligations. For Yeats and Tagore, the poet must unify the individual with the collective conscience through shared poetics, language, myths, rituals, and folk drama. According to Tagore, "Yeats has made his poetry confluent with the ancient poetic tradition of Ireland. [...] He sees beyond the physical world: its mountains and open spaces are a mysterious field for him, traversable by meditation. Had he tried to express this feeling through the channels of modern literature, his sentiment and vigour would have been spoilt; for such modernism is not really flesh, but rather something worn out, rendered stiff and unresponsive by constant use."<sup>388</sup> Tagore's thread of memory links individual experience into a collective memory in terms of loss, trauma, and wounds, and this was meant to provide a new meaning of experience through the unity of culture. Within this idea resides an emphasis on collective mourning: by bringing myth and ritual up-to-speed with folk art and dance, Indian society could conflate long-established moral categories to a centrality of ethics and politics.

According to Yeats, Tagore's play *The Post Office* is "less intellectual, more emotional and simple." Tagore had informed Yeats that the play was inspired by the text of an old village song, "Ferryman, take me to the other shore of the

river,” the other shore symbolizing departure and death, which “may come at any moment.”<sup>389</sup> The play experiences the last day of a dying child, Amal, who is given the illusion of a future by his family and friends, with the exception of his uncle, Madhav. Madhav denies the inevitable, takes on a curmudgeon attitude, and resists the warmth of others who come to pay their last respects. Amal’s deathbed words, spoken to the old Gaffer, are enriched by joy, undertaking his last moments with visions of “the King’s postman coming down the hillside alone, a lantern in his left hand and on his back a bag of letters.” As the old Gaffer listens intently, he comforts the child: “My eyes are not young,” he says, “but you make me see all the same” (29). For Tagore, this symbolist drama is what Gilles Deleuze would call a “Nietzschean tragic joy.” Amal’s affirmation of images in his vision – symbolized by the postman’s letters – defines “the joy of multiplicity, plural joy.” This joy, Deleuze says, is not an Aristotelian or Hegelian “sublimation, a purging, a compensation, a resignation or a reconciliation.” Rather, the tragic is “the aesthetic form of joy, not a medical phrase or a moral solution to pain, fear or pity. It is joy that is tragic.”<sup>390</sup> Madhav cynically resists this joyful experience; in the end he says to the old Gaffer, “What are you standing there for like a statue, folding your palms? – I am nervous. – Say, are there good omens? Why are they darkening the room? How will star-light help?” To which the old Gaffer replies, “Silence, unbeliever” (37).

Seeing the body through mirrors is the leitmotif running through another Symbolist play, Marguerite Vallette-Eymery’s one-Act *The Crystal Spider* (*L’Araignée de cristal*, 1894). Taking the *nom de plume* Rachilde because her family insisted that writing is a masculine occupation, Rachilde was, according to Frazer Lively, the “only woman writer who had a position of influence in the early avant-garde French theater.”<sup>391</sup> *The Crystal Spider* is a two-character, mother-son relationship play in which an overbearing mother pressures her son, Sylvius, called “Terror-Stricken” in the play, to form a romantic relationship with his cousin, Sylvia. The similarity in names is no coincidence; the transgender symbolism, the pressure to bond sexually, and Sylvius’s reflections (the space is filled with mirrors) are asphyxiating the youth. Sylvia is his gender doppelgänger and the androgyny of the young man motivates his contradictory state of confusion, lust, and anguish. His rage against his Oedipal oppression is counteracted by “incestuous overtones,” notes Teresa Stankiewicz,<sup>392</sup> and the body Sylvius views in the mirror horrifies him, because he lives in a phantasmagoria of transgender images he has seen since the age of ten. He tells his mother that when he looked into a mirror for the first time, he saw “an army of phantoms suddenly rising,” making mirrors “so very frightening.”<sup>393</sup> Still, “from that day on, mirrors have strangely absorbed me, in spite of the nervous aversion I felt for them” (275). Amidst this tense relationship sits a mirror at the center of the stage, what Rachilde describes



in the stage directions as a “*tall psyche mirror in empire style, supported on each side by long necks of swans with brass beaks*” (273). The enigmatic “psyche mirror,” what Christine Kiebuszinska calls a “*mise en abyme*,” a hall of mirrors, “reflecting something different in each refraction,”<sup>394</sup> underscores the play’s symbolic meaning.

Amongst the Symbolists there is perhaps no better theatrical advocate than Oscar Wilde (1854–1900). Wilde’s corpus transcends Symbolism; he wrote in many styles and his ubiquitous talents spread over a multitude of genres (he will reappear in this book as a realist of sorts). One of his earliest plays, *Salome*, has all the ingredients attributed to Maeterlinck, Yeats, Tagore, and Rachilde noted above: lyrical language, ritualistic performance, esoteric images, repetition, reflections, and musical rhythms embedded in the orchestrated dialogue. Its language, in Martin Puchner’s words, is “symbolist” in “what one might call ornamental orientalism,” conjuring “a richly ornamental tapestry arranged in formal patterns of repetition, echoes, and revisions that rival the world we see in the theater.”<sup>395</sup> Yet the precocious Wilde also brought to his plays some grounding in realism, some sense of connectivity to the real world, which afforded his dramas a wider appeal. *Salome*, originally written in 1892 for the London stage but refused a license by the British censors, was published in French in 1893 and produced in Paris in 1896. It concerns the biblical tale of Salome’s request for the head of the prophet Iokanaan; urged on by her mother, Herodias, Salome approaches King Herod and demands the head because he spurned her entreaties. The rhythmic language uses repetitious phrases such as Salome’s “I will kiss your mouth, Iokanaan,” Herod’s “Dance for me Salome,” and Herodias’s rebuttal “Do not dance,” each symbolically placed to foster a hypnotic effect. The repetition of the color red (blood and red lips, for instance), or the moon’s change from silver, to blood red, to black as Salome cradles the head, underscore the sensualist-Symbolist refrain that would reoccur in Suzan-Lori Parks’s notion of “rep-and-rev” (repetition and revision) nearly a century later.<sup>396</sup> Shelton Waldrep has noted that “Wilde’s work consists of an ongoing debate about the relationship between the visual and the verbal.” As a result of Romantic influences, Wilde employed what Waldrep calls “synesthesia,” a “trope that provides a concrete illustration of the romantic doctrine of the fusion of the arts as it was inherited by Wilde”<sup>397</sup> (more on this shortly).

Two facets set Wilde apart from his contemporaries: his sense of humor, which obviates the general melancholic tone of most Symbolist plays, and his stress on materiality. Herod’s puffery, to cite just one example, is matched by his forgetfulness; he commands an order yet forgets what it is he has commanded. “Bring me – What is it that I desire? I forget. Ah! Ah! I remember.”<sup>398</sup> John Lahr writes that “Wilde’s wonderful jokes dethrone the serious and kept life on the surface, where he could handle it. His frivolity resolutely insisted on

the superficial.”<sup>399</sup> The play is deadly serious, with the death and the threat of death circling the air; yet Wilde never misses an opportunity to insert gallows humor or bon mots into the mix. As Thomas de Quincy noted in his essay “Knocking at the Gate,” the inebriated doorkeeper’s loquacious remarks about sexual prowess (or lack thereof) in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* not only added levity to the play, the humor’s juxtaposition added to the horror of the crimes. The very incongruity of laughter following horror only adds to the horror. Wilde, too, raises the bar of terror by inserting jokes; laughter amidst terror brings a reality to the situation that often heightens fear.

Salome is a character quickly engulfed by sexual desire. Once rebuffed, she turns malevolent and vindictive. Her desire for the head of the Baptist is presaged in the suicide of a suitor, the Young Syrian. But even in this Wilde cannot help but insert humor. The Young Syrian’s body lies onstage, but it takes a while for Herod to notice. When he does, he asks for his identity.

- |                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| FIRST SOLDIER:  | It is our captain, sir. It is the young Syrian whom you made captain of the guard but three days gone. |
| HEROD:          | I issued no order that he should be slain.   |
| SECOND SOLDIER: | He slew himself, sire.   |
| HEROD:          | For what reason? I had made him captain of my guard! (312).  |

Herod’s vanity cannot comprehend why someone would commit suicide after being promoted; and his sycophantic soldiers cater to his whims. Nowhere does Wilde suggest that the body be removed; the actors have to step over it during the scenes. It is gallows humor, to be sure, illustrating Wilde’s wonderful sense of irony that the specter of death which hovers over the play is juxtaposed with ironic ribaldry. There is a zaniness mixed with seriousness that is trademark Wilde; Sheldon Waldrep notes that, “With its rococo sexual situations, stylized language, elaborate sets, and costumes that emphasized the visual as antirealist spectacle – not to mention its Oriental subject matter, gay characters, and general drag atmosphere – Wilde composed a drama as rock concert.”<sup>400</sup>

Wilde balances his romanticism with materialism, grounding his characters in relative mimetic certainty. He notes in his essay *De Profundis* that “The faith that others give to what is unseen, I give to what one can touch, and look at.”<sup>401</sup> The materiality of his plays follows along the trajectory of “synesthesia.” The modernist term first appeared in 1891, meaning a sensation in one part of the body produced by stimulus applied to another. Wilde intones a musical cadence with repeated phrases to create an associated mental image and sense impressions. Edouard Roditi examines Wilde’s interest in synesthesia in terms of Wilde’s interest in Romanticism: “Ever since the Eighteenth Century, when it had inspired scientific and mechanical experiments such as the Abbé Castel’s

color-organ or Diderot's investigations of blindness, the theory of synæsthesia, according to which one sense is able to perceive what appeals to another sense, had haunted the whole tradition of European Romanticism."<sup>402</sup> Holding the head, Salome says:

Ah, Iokanaan, Iokanaan, thou wert the man that I loved alone among men! All other men were hateful to me. But thou wert beautiful! The body was a column of ivory set upon the feet of silver decked with shields of ivory. There was nothing in the world so white as thy body. There was nothing in the world so black as thy hair. In the whole world there was nothing so red as thy mouth. Thy voice was a sensor that scattered strange perfumes, and when I looked on thee I heard a strange music (328).

Wilde wrote the play when the term synesthesia had psychological implications, referred to clinically as "color-hearing," what was deemed an abnormality at the time. Wilde builds on this connectivity by repeating images and colors, in order to make the symbol red, or kisses, or dancing, not only a mental picture, but a material-bodily connection in his audience. If, as Terry Eagleton notes, "Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body,"<sup>403</sup> Wilde personifies this notion with his coinage "The Dance of the Seven Veils" (323). Salome's ultimate dance for Herod in return for the Prophet's head is meant as an Eros-Thanatos dialectic, a merging of sexuality with the death-urge and bringing the whole Symbolist theme to a theatrical crescendo. Wilde's centrality of the body as ultimate symbol had the benefit of opening modern artists to multiple creative possibilities. Modernist dancers Isadora Duncan, Ruth St.-Denis, Loie Fuller, Maud Allen, Mata Hari (Margaretha Zelle), Ida Rubinstein, Tamara Karsavina, and Aida Overton Walker took their cues from Wilde's play and capitalized on the Salome dance throughout the *fin de siècle*. Their performances became the nodal point of Symbolism and one of the defining features of modernism in dance.

# Chapter 6

## Rising Expressionism

There are two Expressionist beginnings, both originating in Germany: one pre-World War I, which takes as its influence Symbolism but reshapes it into a more highly theatricalized, visceral style; and post-World War I, which responded to the mass slaughter, wartime defeat, failed revolution, and hyperinflation in Germany. The latter developed in Weimar, which was far enough away from the chaos of Berlin; the experiences of post-war Germany, with the destruction of the rigid Prussian caste system and authoritarian monarchy, opened fertile ground for sexual adventurism and artistic experimentations. The rise of cabarets and dance halls provided venues for gays and lesbians emboldened by a liberal government. The period, however, also witnessed social panic provoked by inflation and communist-fascist street brawls, which energized brothels as escapist havens and, during the twenties, offered another means of venting steam: massive hero-worship rallies honoring German nationalism. The prostitute, in particular, was an essential feature in the art scene, where desire and corruption meet, the fake and the real combine; and every hedonistic indulgence becomes available. In the art of Otto Dix, Max Beckmann, and George Grosz, eroticism and disgust, desire and loathing, intermingle.

The Expressionist playwright Georg Kaiser (1878–1945) wrote over forty dramas. Perhaps his most well-known is *From Morn to Midnight* (1912, first produced in 1917), the soulful journey of a bank cashier who embezzles money in order to pursue a married woman. His disillusionment with his stale and uninspired life is reflective of many Expressionist plays. As the protagonist (named only as Cashier) says to his wife,

Where must I go? That's the hard question, wife. I've climbed down from wind-swept trees to look for an answer. This was my first call. It was bound to be the first. Warm and cozy, this nest of yours; I won't deny its good points; but it doesn't stand the final test. No! The answer is clear. This is not a halting-place, but a signpost; the road leads further on.<sup>404</sup>

Along similar lines is the playwright Ernst Toller (1893–1939), whose play *Transfiguration* (1917, first performed in 1919), according to Renate Benson, “employs and pushes to the extreme the forms of the *Stationendrama*, a form already used by Strindberg in *To Damascus* (1898) and further developed by Kaiser.”<sup>405</sup> The play has a strong agitprop overlay, a characteristic feature of Expressionist drama. Its anti-war sentiment is etched in the characters' bitter sarcasm, exemplified by this speech aligning passion and cruelty.

FRIEDRICH: It had to be, poor woman, for our country's sake.

WOMAN: For our country's sake? Our country? For the sake of a small handful of rich men who feast and debauch and gamble with the products of our labor. Ah, how I hate them! Brutes, devils! I know them well; I was one of them myself. God rewards you for your labors, they say! But what sort of God is it that lets us rot away in misery?<sup>406</sup>

Juxtaposition of passion and cruelty is a fundamental feature in Expressionism, illuminated marvelously in Sophie Treadwell's Expressionist drama *Machinal* (1928). The play's title, Jerry Dickey notes, “is taken directly from a French word meaning mechanical, automatic or fragmentary.”<sup>407</sup> In her description of the play, Treadwell offers her “plan” for the drama, “by showing the different phases of life that the woman comes in contact with, and in none of which she finds any place, any peace.” This is because the “woman is essentially soft, tender, and the life around her is essentially hard, mechanized. Business, home, marriage, having a child, seeing pleasure – all are difficult for her – mechanical, nerve nagging.”<sup>408</sup> Only in her brief tryst with a gigolo does she find any satisfaction, and this is fleeting. The clerical protagonist (clerks are a favorite Expressionist protagonist), given only the name of Young Woman, lives in what Julia Walker calls a “Taylorized hell,”<sup>409</sup> a reference to the mechanization of labor division, flexible specialization, and assembly-line efficiency first discerned by Adam Smith, later theorized and updated by Frederick Taylor in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and eventuating in Henry Ford's assembly line. Throughout the play the Young Woman (we only later in the play find out her name is Helen Jones) is alienated from society and family; she finds little satisfaction, internally or externally; her personal life is passed from an unfeeling mother to a brutalizing husband; and her work is nothing more than a mechanized existence. She is a cog in the wheel, akin to Charlie Chaplin in his film *Modern Times* (1936), existing as a

mere extension of machines. Like Yank in Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922), she is part of the engines of modernization, an instrument of technology, and a product of the harrowing drum-beat of mechanization. Yank shovels coals in the bowels of a steamship, heat and coal covering his body; the Young Woman types in a sterile office devoid of warmth, where nothing "touches" her in any humane way; and both experience the extremities of temperature.

*Machinal*, based on the trial of Ruth Snyder and murder of her husband,<sup>410</sup> was pejoratively referred to by Robert Brustein as "one of those banal tabloid stories" demonstrating how "a sensitive dish of cream is curdled in the age of the machine."<sup>411</sup> Yet a close examination of the play reveals an originality transcending mere yellow journalism. The drama unfolds in nine scenes, each designed to situate the protagonist in an uncomfortable enclosure; even in her one moment of passion, the "Intimate" scene of episode six, the setting is "*a dark room,*" where "*nothing can be discerned.*" The Young Woman, J. Ellen Gainor and James Dickey contend, "is not the enlightened, socially aware New Woman found" in other feminist or pseudo-feminist plays. She derives her force instead "from the implication that autonomy remains the right and within the power of 'any woman,' not solely the intellectual or political activist."<sup>412</sup> Much of what is characterized as her "ordinariness" is in her language: half-articulate, staccato, and filled with a mixture of desperation and resignation. The opening office scene orchestrates various workers' voices longing to make connections but marooned in isolation. Their language is scattered, dispersed, and blurred to a degree that eradicates their personalities; their subjectivity is swallowed in the vortex of machines. The scurrilous boss looms over them, questioning their work ethic, checking to see who is late or slacking off, and the day moves through time but never *in time* – never in tune with an organic rhythm, always at the mercy of machinery, time-clocks, and organized work-days. Everything about the conditions is cold, inorganic, and oppressive; even the backdrop of sounds is designed to pummel the women workers. "Like the expressionist plays," writes Ronald Wainscott, "much of the action is heavily dependent on responses to sound and music that provide ironic or pathetic counterpoint to the onstage action and frequently serve to overwhelm the protagonist."<sup>413</sup> The second scene opens at home, amidst lower-middle-class gimcracks, where the badgering mother insensitively thinks of her daughter as merely a repository of eating and child-rearing, a reproductive "machine" in simpatico with modern technology.

YOUNG WOMAN: Ma – I want to talk to you.  
 MOTHER: Aren't you eating a potato?  
 YOUNG WOMAN: No.  
 MOTHER: Why not?  
 YOUNG WOMAN: I don't want one.

MOTHER: Potatoes go with the stew – here!  
 YOUNG WOMAN: Ma, I don’t want it!  
 MOTHER: Want it! Take it! (188).

Throughout the scene the Young Woman wants to make contact, have a human conversation – in contemporary parlance, enjoy “quality time” with her mother. But time here is nothing more than efficiency and “Mother” force-feeds her daughter as a substitute for emotions. The Mother, like everyone else in the play (with the exception of the lover), blots out her daughter, turning her into an abstraction. The image of a mother feeding a child should provide comfort and coziness; but Treadwell, in Brechtian fashion, overturns this image, giving us instead an “alienation” of the loving mother-child relationships we have come to expect. The Young Woman works to pay for her mother’s existence, yet her mother provides only ingratitude. Outside forces – sounds – interrupt the Young Woman’s attempt to make contact: garbage collection, radios, voices of small boys playing – all intercede on her psyche, fracturing her agency. The Young Woman has been proposed to – her louche boss has fallen in love “with her hands.” He makes her “skin curl,” and when “He puts a hand on me, my blood turns cold” (192). Tactility which should be comforting has the experience of alienating; ironically the situation is not the same for the Boss – he longs for her touch. At the end of the scene it is the Young Woman who consoles the Mother, agreeing to wash the dishes. She puts on rubber gloves to protect her hands – hands that type, wash, cook, and will service her soon-to-be husband. And the brutality continues, relentlessly – at her honeymoon, birthing her child, domestic life. The increasing pressure leads her to kill her husband. Her key monologue in scene four, dubbed “Maternal,” places the Young Woman amidst mechanical, callous, and perfunctory doctors and nurses unsympathetic to her gagging, nausea, and ailments – both physically and spiritually.

YOUNG WOMAN (*alone.*): Let me alone – let me alone – let me alone – I’ve submitted to enough – I won’t submit to any more – crawl off – crawl off in the dark – Vixen crawled under the bed – way back in the corner under the bed – they were all drowned – puppies don’t go to heaven – heaven – golden stairs – long stairs – long – too long – long golden stairs – climb those golden stairs (204).

The monologue continues to evoke heaven, St. Peter’s gates, God, and, again, the image of hands: “got to love God – God is love – even if he’s bad they got to love him – even if he’s got fat hands – fat hands” (205). In the background at the scene’s end the sound of “*riveting continues, until it goes into the sound of an electric piano and scene lights up for Episode Five*” (206). Treadwell is creating an oral-temporal pressure that continues to efface the Young Woman, demonstrating

a contingency in every scenic composition, demolishing the sacrosanct idea of motherhood, and enveloping the protagonist in alienation at every turn.

What the protagonist experiences is, in fact, a kind of “disalienation,” what Henri Lefebvre describes as a deeper strand of modernism. Modernism, he says, “carries alienation to extremes. In addition to all the old alienations it produces a supplement that becomes heavier and heavier – technical alienation. The topsy-turvy world is still the real world. But at the same time, beyond this maximal alienation, disalienation becomes only more and more pressing.”<sup>414</sup> The Young Woman is “disalienated” not only from others, but from her body and her work. Julia Walker points to the typewriter as the Young Woman’s “tool” of work and as the source of disalienation, observing that typing was originally an honorable profession among men in the nineteenth century, a symbol of their creative prowess; but as the twentieth century appeared, stenography and dictation surfaced as “acceptable” workplace conditions for women. The very object of “authorization,” the typewriter, is converted to a *doubling down on alienation*. The typing machine is impersonal, making the Young Woman nothing more than an extended copying instrument for her boss. Its noise, compounded by other secretaries, creates a machine-gun auralty: dissonance and disturbance envelop the protagonist. In *Machinal*, Walker notes, the Young Woman “free-associates about the horrid prospect of entering into a loveless marriage when it is clear she has no other choice. With no means of self-authorization before her, it is as if she has no self.” This alienation of self, the key constituent of Expressionism, is illuminated in Treadwell’s play. The Young Woman goes about her life, Walker explains, “Typing, adding, filing, patching, all are routinized mechanical skills, devoid of any personal expression.” As the typewriter “feminized a formerly respectable white-collar profession for men,” it “relegated that profession to a more subordinate position within the office, replicating the patriarchal structure of marriage. The roles assigned to women in the office were not unlike those assigned to them at home.” The model of the play, Ruth Snyder, also worked for her husband as a secretary before marrying (and murdering) him. The typewriter, Walker adds, “symbolically erased the secretary’s ‘personality,’ perhaps suggesting to Treadwell an analogy between the standardized forms of typescript and the standardized roles that women were assigned under patriarchy.”<sup>415</sup>

*Machinal* shares much with Georg Büchner’s *Woyzeck*, where surrounding characters are more symbol than three-dimensional; both plays draw from court case studies of madness and murder; both plays are replete with sounds drumming into the ear of the protagonist; and each play is divided into choppy, episodic scenes. Both protagonists are consumed by humiliation and a disengagement with their bodies: Woyzeck the guinea pig for science and the Young Woman by machinery. Treadwell goes further, examining the intrusiveness of



technology and patriarchy that nullifies gender identification. Walter Benjamin observed that during the industrialized nineteenth century, “women were for the first time used in large numbers in the production process outside the home.” By employing them in factories, he says, “masculine traits were bound to appear in these women eventually. These were caused, in particular, by the distorting influence of factory work. Higher forms of production, as well as the political struggle per se, fostered masculine characteristics of a more refined nature.”<sup>416</sup> For the Young Woman, her hands represent the last vestiges of femininity, which are ultimately brought out in her trial. Mr. Jones, her husband, was struck and killed with a bottle that left no fingerprints. The Young Woman tries to pass the murder off on intruders breaking into her home. When confronted by the Prosecution on the witness stand, she holds to her story. The Prosecutor, however, presses her: “You are in the habit of wearing rubber gloves at night,” he asks (242), even after her husband expressly wished she would stop wearing them. After pursuing this line of questioning, the Prosecution produces an affidavit from the Young Woman’s lover, confirming their assignation. This last account breaks her; she confesses. When the Judge asks why she did it, the Young Woman replies, “To be free” (248). In exemplary Expressionist style, the scene in the courtroom closes with a *Schrei*: “*Young Woman begins to moan – suddenly – as though the realization of the enormity of her isolation had just come upon her. It is a sound of desolation, of agony, of human woe. It continues until the end of the scene*” (248).

The Young Woman is erased by the eradication of her body. This erasure is not merely physical, via an artificial “dying onstage.” Rather, Treadwell artfully and symbolically removes pieces of her body parts. At the final scene, titled in characteristically Expressionistic style “A Machine,” the Young Woman is being prepared for execution. Her hair is to be shaved while she is supposedly consoled by a Priest. Impersonal guards and matrons surround her, perfunctorily going about their business of shaving and execution with all the enthusiasm of an assembly line. The Barbers cut off a patch of her hair – a piece of her body part – noting that hair-shaving is “routine” and part of the “regulations,” while she implores them to leave her in peace.

YOUNG WOMAN: No! No! Don’t touch me – touch me! (*They take her and put her in the chair, cut a patch from her hair*). I will not be submitted – this indignity! No! I will not be submitted! – Leave me alone! Oh my God am I to never be let alone! Always to have to submit – to submit! No more – not now – I’m going to die – I won’t submit! Not now! (251)

Disrobed, shaven, stripped of dignity and humiliated, the Young Woman calls out for freedom, for the one moment of her life – the murder – when she was “free.” She asks the Priest: “When I did what I did I was free! Free and not

afraid! How is that, Father? How can that be? A great sin – a mortal sin – for which I must die and go to Hell – but it made me free!” (252). She asks the Priest to fill her void and reconcile the contradictions and irony invested in her one moment of agency – the bludgeoning of her husband. Her words pour forth in waves, desperate sounds, and inchoate bursts of emotion; the Priest contrastingly speaks in platitudes and boilerplate nonsense about redemption, trying to pulverize her into nothingness, like some medieval corruption that has intertwined itself into her being and now must be expunged. It is striking how morally sanctimonious the Priest is, without ever bothering to explain what exactly she is experiencing or acknowledge her anguish. His self-righteous indignation is the antipode of her longing, in Woyzeck-like fashion, for comprehension. Woyzeck wants to “see” the betrayal and the Young Woman wants to see “freedom”; both are expressing what typifies Expressionism’s rage – a mixture of self-effacement and desire to know, what Wolfgang Paulsen calls an “unmediated yearning in dramatic expression,” and Annalisa Viviani calls “this immense, heaven-striving, ‘steep’ gesture in the axis about which the whole of Expressionist dramatic art turns.”<sup>417</sup> The Young Woman’s inarticulateness is in itself an articulation of her state of mind, the exemplary Expressionist lapidary dialogue – replete with dashes, exclamation points, outbursts of longing, and conjuring the interiority through hyperbole.

The Gothic emotionalism in *Machinal* is the antithesis of Maeterlinck’s symbolism, yet both Maeterlinck and Treadwell – and the gamut of avant gardists – search for ways of expressing agency that rises above mere reported reality. The Young Woman’s expressions are inexorably bound to madness – confusion, delirium, and ineffable ambiguity – yet not madness in a nullifying sense, but rather a maddening rage justified by the inexorable brutality of her existence. According to a stage direction in her unpublished typescript, Treadwell ponders the meaning of her inner monologues: “Does their place in the plan of the play – connecting links, or better – connecting channels of action – demand that the thought move through them in an approximately straight line, or can one be permitted a nearer approach to the scatteredness, unexpectedness of the relaxed meditating mind?” In employing monologues and expressionist techniques, Treadwell hoped to appeal to women in the audience “by accentuation, by distortion” and “by the quickening of still secret places, in the consciousness of the audience, especially of women.”<sup>418</sup> She understands that suppressing the female ego creates an extremely unruly place in the mind, a labyrinth of inadmissible desires and scrambled urges suffocated by a culture determined to keep women “in their place.” Sophie Treadwell, writes Barbara Bywaters, “belongs to the coterie of early modern women playwrights who portrayed with relentless honesty women’s struggle for autonomy against a patriarchal system.”<sup>419</sup> Autonomy is the buzzword of modernism, and like other dramatists, Treadwell highlights an injustice

done to a segment of the population. Unlike the Symbolists, whose poetization of language and emotion is meant to get at the core of human expression lyrically and thus achieve the political indirectly, Treadwell and the Expressionists bring art, in Richard Murphy's words, "sharply down to earth, to the level of the banal and the everyday,"<sup>420</sup> in order to expose injustice front and center.

"The normative force of performativity – its power to establish what qualifies as being," Judith Butler posits, "works not only through reiteration, but through exclusion as well. And in the case of bodies, those exclusions haunt signification as its abject borders or as that which is strictly foreclosed: the unlivable, the nonnarrativizable, the traumatic."<sup>421</sup> Treadwell undermines any beatification of her protagonist; the blunt, grotesque deformation of her hair – the cutting off of one patch – visualizes the ugly, fragmentary, chaotic, and traumatic foreclosure Butler refers to in order to subvert any romanticism or glorification of her death. In the end the voracious reporters seeking *Schadenfreude* – the guilty pleasure of watching her die – try to get a glimpse of the Young Woman, to see how she might behave in her final moments. Questioning the efficacy of the electric chair – modernist machineries sometimes fail – they say:

1ST REPORTER: Suppose the machine shouldn't work!  
 2ND REPORTER: It'll work! – It always works! –  
 3RD REPORTER: Hush!  
 PRIEST: Saints of God make intercession for us – Be merciful – Spare us,  
 oh Lord – be merciful –  
 1ST REPORTER: Her lips are moving – what is she saying?  
 2ND REPORTER: Nothing.  
 3RD REPORTER: Hush! (254)

The Young Woman's body is expressing anguish in the face of her execution (and every good actor should recognize this). She is wordless, speech having dissolved as useless against the spectacular vortex of her highly publicized execution. All that remains are pieces of her body, picked apart by her executioners. The body – Treadwell's key expression of her aesthetic – is fragmenting, crumbing, splintering into shards. Her final word comes breathtakingly short:

YOUNG WOMAN: (*Calling out*). Somebody! Somebody – (*Her voice is cut off*) (255).

She is cut off from language, but even more, she is disengaged from the "body" (notice the last word shorn of the last letter), a syntactical image made potent by cutting the *Schrei* (cry or scream) off from its final letter. Renate Benson's description of the twin pillars of Expressionist drama, Ernst Toller and Georg Kaiser, can easily describe Treadwell. Toller and Kaiser, Benson says,

“sought not mimesis but expression of a new vitalist feeling, the [Henri Bergson’s] *élan vital*, and of their personal vision of the world,” yielding “the subjective expression of an inner world (vision)”; and the artist “has to free himself from all academic rules and traditional aesthetic concepts (especially traditional norms of beauty).”<sup>422</sup> Expressionism undermined the perceived comfort zones of expectations, highlighting moral rankness in both form and content.

# Part III

## Realism

“Real life,” George Bernard Shaw said, “is so ill understood, even by its clearest observers, that no sort of consistency is discoverable in it; there is no ‘natural justice’ corresponding to that simple and pleasant concept, ‘poetic justice’; and, as a whole, it is unthinkable. But, on the other hand, it is credible, stimulating, suggestive, various, free from creeds and systems – in short, it is real.”<sup>423</sup> Amidst the rise of modernism’s avant garde Shaw and his realistic “problem plays” were on the defensive – which for the insouciant George Bernard Shaw meant going on the offensive. The whole edifice of dramatic realism – problem play, thesis play, drama of ideas, didactic drama, drawing room drama, romantic-rhetorical drama, etc., all derivatives of the well-made play genre of the nineteenth century, and all rebelling against it – flourished during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Dramatic realism became a testing ground for ideas and society. Martin Meisel observes that for Shaw and others, “the underlying notion of a critical-realistic drama” meant that “ideals and conventions were criticized, tested, examined, ridiculed, and proposed, and in which dramatic situations had no value except as instruments to test ideals and conventions, and to reveal character.”<sup>424</sup> Shaw outlines the main thrust of the so-called “realistic problem play”: social questions, he asserts, “are produced by the conflict of human institutions with human feelings,” and as such “the material of the dramatist is always some conflict of human feeling with circumstances; so that, since institutions are circumstances, every social question furnishes material for drama.” He proffers these directives: “Every social question, arising as it must from a conflict between human feeling and circumstances, affords material for drama”; the preference for the subject matter ought to be “political and temporal circumstances,” creating topical drama; and the “resultant tendency to drive social questions on to the stage,

and into fiction and poetry, will eventually be counteracted by improvements in social organization, which will enable all prosaic social questions to be dealt with satisfactorily long before they become grave enough to absorb the energies which claim the devotion of the dramatist."<sup>425</sup> Shaw was too good a playwright to write sophomoric term papers; his humor and romantic intrigue (not to be confused with Romanticism) pumped life into his best dramas. Like John Millington Synge, Shaw gave his characters flesh and blood, and it is Synge who provides one of the best descriptions of realism in drama: "The drama is made serious," he says, "not by the degree in which it is taken up with the problems that are serious in themselves, but by the degree in which it gives the nourishment, not very easy to define, on which our imaginations live." Drama, he adds, "like the symphony, does not teach or prove anything," but drama can and should provide humor. Likewise Shaw, Sean O'Casey, and Oscar Wilde, the necessity of humor – exposing human foolishness and accentuating folly – is a requisite. As Synge says (somewhat harshly of Baudelaire), "Of the things which nourish the imagination humour is one of the most needed, and it is dangerous to limit or destroy it. Baudelaire calls laughter the greatest sign of the Satanic element in man; and where a country loses its humour, as some towns in Ireland are doing, there will be morbidity of mind, as Baudelaire's mind was morbid."<sup>426</sup>

To call Synge, Shaw, O'Casey, Wilde, and others in this section "realistic" dramatists is stretching the term "realism" to its limits. The playwrights would likely balk at such categorization. It is impossible, writes Sean O'Casey, to "go out into the streets and lanes of the city and compel the people to come on the stage, for the people on the stage must be of the stage and not of the streets and lanes of the city or of the highways and hedges of the country. The most realistic characters in the most realistic play cannot be true to life."<sup>427</sup> For Wilde, "art imitating life" is dull and in-artistic; art (not nature) is more graceful, eloquent, and appreciative of craft and beauty. "The more we study Art," he says, "the less we care for nature," because art demonstrates "Nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolute unfinished condition." In lieu of sincerity and authenticity, art and drama require the "art of lying" (calling it "The Decay of Lying"). For Wilde, nineteenth-century English melodrama reproduces characters who "talk on the stage exactly as they would talk off it; they have neither aspirations nor aspirates; they are taken directly from life and reproduce its vulgarity down to the smallest detail; they present the gait, manner, costume, and accept of real people; they would pass unnoticed in a third-class railway carriage. And yet how wearisome these plays are!"<sup>428</sup> Synge couldn't agree more. "Ibsen and Zola," he claims, are "dealing with the reality of life in joyless and pallid words. On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy, and that is why the

intellectual modern drama has failed, and people have grown sick of the false joy of the musical comedy, that has been given them in place of the rich joy found in what is superb and wild in reality.”<sup>429</sup>

Still, the playwrights in this section valued words as synonymous with reality; they hardly hesitated to use the stage as a mirror of life, or at least aspects of life they wished to accentuate. For the dramatist here, words, content, and relationships are transparent; characters evolve, change, and grow, and their trajectory is visible, their transitions palpable, and their development, while unpredictable and even uncanny, occurs openly. The playwrights here would not, by and large, subscribe to a self-reflexive use of words, an alienation of identity, or a veiling of characterizations found in modernist linguistic schools such as the Prague Circle, Structuralism, or Formalism. The “repugnance” to content and the preference for form in these schools, Fredric Jameson maintains, “lies precisely in a kind of transformation of form into content, in which the form of Structuralist research (stories are organized like sentences, like linguistic enunciations) turns into a proposition about content: literary works are about language, take the process of speech itself as their essential subject matter.”<sup>430</sup> René Wellek (and, I would suggest, the playwrights here) gainsays this, contending that “self-reflexivity fails to define literature and most poetry, and it is completely refuted by the novel in which words may become almost transparent.” The same with these dramatists; literature, Wellek says, is more than self-reflexive; it “evokes a world of its own through language. I cannot accept the fashionable talk about the ‘prison house of language.’ Literature does refer to reality, says something about the world, and makes us see and know the external world and that of our own and other minds.”<sup>431</sup>

What the dramatists who constitute this section understood is the power as well as the limitations of drama as a medium for social change. They were doubtlessly aware of social problems: Shaw’s Fabian socialism and pacifism are indelibly woven into his plays; Synge’s socialism and empathy for Ireland’s poor inform his work; O’Casey’s pacifism and satire of Irish nationalism caused backlash riots; and Wilde’s Dandyism and alleged indifference to politics failed to prevent his incarceration for homosexuality. Yet these “realists” – and I use this rubric loosely – were aware of art’s shortcoming as a weapon for justice. Terry Eagleton explicates modern art’s “contradictory material status within bourgeois society,” its limitation to inspire change. Culture, Eagleton maintains, “is deeply locked into the structure of commodity production; but one effect of this is to release it onto a certain ideological autonomy, hence allowing it to speak against the very social order with which it is guiltily complicit. It is this complicity which spurs art into protest, but which also strikes that protest agonized and ineffectual, formal gesture rather than irate polemic.” Art can only provide an implicit critique of the culture it lives in, and it can only be

authentic if it acknowledges (or confesses) its debt to the very culture it deplors. The “aporia of modernist culture,” Eagleton contends, lies in the fact that art must “either abolish itself entirely – the audacious strategy of the avant garde – or hover indecisively between life and death, subsuming its own impossibility into itself.”<sup>432</sup> The realist playwrights depended on bourgeois culture to support them, while they simultaneously condemned the very hand that fed them.



# Chapter 7

## Rural Realism

Perhaps no play exemplifies the state of suspended tension between life and death better than Synge's powerful one-act *Riders to the Sea*. *Riders* is hardly "dramatic" in a Hegelian sense; there is little "conflict" as such. Yet its lyricism, authenticity, and pathos make it perhaps the closest play to "modern" tragedy as the Greeks prescribed. John Millington Synge (1871–1909), following the advice of Yeats, traveled to the Aran Islands off the coast of Ireland in 1897, and, like a good actor absorbing a role, studied the fishing villages and their way of life. Fishing is the primary sustenance for the islands that derive their name from three intersecting lands (Inishmore, Inishmaan, and Inisheer) in the Atlantic. Afflicted with severe poverty, Synge witnessed appalling conditions, but he was after something more than photo-realist reportage: he created a play reflecting the relentless nature of the sea, the culture's stoicism, the lyricism expressed in the idioms and phrases of the Gaelic-Celtic semantics, and tragic-evoking pathos. Language, as with the other playwrights of this section, had an organic link (a dialect) incorporating specificity of time and place. This was Synge's attempt at the creation of a nationalist poetics. He followed Yeats's advice yet each had different ways of attaining this goal. Yeats, according to T. R. Henn, wanted "to make the nation conscious of its heritage and myth; to provide a point round which the popular imagination might first awaken, and then concentrate its power; and at the last to unify itself for a nationalist effort by the imaginary liberated in the drama." Synge, by contrast, sought the "non-political, detached, ironic; concerned with the excited yet dispassionate exploration of the world of the western peasantry, and of an imagination that was still fiery, magnificent, and tender."<sup>433</sup> Despite the difference in style, they shared visionary dreams of an Irish National theatre grounded in folk tradition, myth, and language.

*Riders to the Sea* (produced in 1904 and at the Abbey Theatre in 1907, along with Synge's riot-provoking *The Playboy of the Western World*) is brief, potent, and comes to terms with death as a way of life. The play's "action" is akin to the Symbolists' emphasis on inaction; nothing essentially happens in any cataclysmic sense. There is death, happening offstage and, like the Symbolists, impacting the living. Yet, unlike Maeterlinck and others, the play is site-specific; it is grounded in realistic setting and costume; and seeks mimetic recreation of a particular time and place. Maurya and her two daughters, Nora and Cathleen, live on the Aran Island with her last remaining son, Bartley. The sea has claimed the lives of her other sons, husband, and father. Maurya tries to convince Bartley not to go to the sea, but he resists her entreaties, sealing his fate. The play's symbolism is scattered and dispersed throughout every image-evoking word, where Catholicism, paganism, fate, and myth intersect and collide: the rope and boards represent the cross; the Mother's image of the dead son Michael riding the red mare erupts in the symbolism of death; pagan superstitions abound; and Bartley's death itself is predicted – he is knocked off his horse and drowns. "This play is so exquisite," Tom Driver contends, "and of such power that one may call it perfect within its own carefully defined limitations."<sup>434</sup> When Bartley leaves for the sea, Maurya sees his death much like Maeterlinck's elders:

MAURYA: (*in a low voice, but clearly*). It's little the like of him knows of the sea. ... Bartley will be lost now, and let you call in Bamon and make me a good coffin out of white boards, for I won't live after them. I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house – six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming into the world – and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they're gone now the lot of them. ... (103).

Maurya's threnody consists of memory, a form of cultural-collective engagement that, according to Kate Chedgzoy, "traditionally has a female form – that of the Greek goddess Mnemosyne."<sup>435</sup> Shorn of any control of history, women found themselves relying on memory instead; folk tales and reminiscences are in lieu of conventional power structure controlled by men. Hers is a memory akin to post-traumatic stress disorder, a repetitive lament of someone attempting to make sense of an ongoing horrific condition. This memory is on two levels: collective and personal. Death by drowning among the inhabitants of the Aran Islands is practically taken for granted (they refuse to learn to swim). Maurya represents the aggregation of other mothers, wives, and daughters encountering the folk milieu, her story a micro and macrocosm of life on the Islands. In what Paul Connerton calls "acts of transfer," the individual recalls a shared past on the basis of common practices and conventions,<sup>436</sup> in this case,

the commonality of mothers. But it is also an individual memory, a recollection of time and space – the very space of the stage – where Maurya says, “I was sitting here with Bartley, and he a baby lying on my two knees” (104) or when she takes Michael’s clothes “*in her hands*” (104). These symbolic memorials constitute her memory, ghostly thoughts suggestive of a past enmeshed in a moral framework unchanged by time. Nothing alters for Maurya: death’s constant beckoning becomes embodied memory, artistically etched in her words. The memory of her actions (inactions?) is represented in the repetitions and rhythms of her language, words that bring the past to life, retaining the sounds and textures of the time and place from which they sprang, and enlivening Maurya’s voice as she grapples with abstract notions of death in concrete terms.

Synge creates this environment through an admixture of props and thoughts, symbols and earthy things. Past events, present occurrences, and future predictions exist in an echo chamber. The play’s symbolism is accentuated when Bartley stands in the doorway before leaving, as if the doorframe is his coffin. This symbol had been enacted before, by Maurya’s other sons, husband, and father; and it will be enacted again, ritualistically, by other mothers and sons to come. The visual artist Armando considers the notion of memory that is germane to *Riders*: “You have,” he says, “the past, you have the present, and then there is also a future. That makes three. But there is a fourth: the past of the memory, of the imagination.” This “memory” differs than the historic past (the facts) in that it has been “colored in with the index, kneaded and bent, it has been displaced and shrunk, it has been crumpled, thick here, thin there, and people think that’s how it should be.”<sup>437</sup>

One might criticize Synge, perhaps, for overloading his brief one-act with top-heavy symbols and passivity; Yeats favored *The Shadow of the Glen* over *Riders to the Sea* because the latter seemed to him “for all the nobility of its end, its mood of Greek tragedy, too passive in suffering.”<sup>438</sup> But few can object to the purity of the play’s language, the musicality of its rhythms, and the mythical emblem of folk culture. As Simon Williams observes, *Riders to the Sea* “is arguably the most complete realization of the Yeatsian myth of Ireland staged by the Irish National Theatre, more complete than Yeats achieved in any of his own plays.”<sup>439</sup> George Steiner, writing about Georg Büchner, wrote that his “Drama is language under such high pressure of feeling that the words carry a necessary and immediate connotation of gesture.”<sup>440</sup> Much the same can be said of *Riders*, only now its words are legato rather than staccato. When, for instance, Bartley’s body is laid before Maurya, the townswomen are “*keening softly*,” underscoring the lamentation, as Maurya intones: “They’re all gone now, and there isn’t anything more the sea can do to me. [...] I’ll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. I’ll have no

call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening" (105).

This oft-quoted passage is richly metaphoric, culling out sounds of wind, breaking surf, and keening women. The connection of images to sounds, and the background keening, gives the play an operatic quality – a mixture of lamentation and euphonious auralty in words. The play is thickened by inexorable doom akin to ancient Greek tragedy; but the doom is not stylized – there is no heightened solemnity, no abstraction to lift the play out of its realistic intent. Rather, it is simply guttural and gut-wrenching, a play “for the mournful,” as Walter Benjamin would say about *Trauerspiel* (mourning plays): “not so much plays which cause mourning, as plays through which mournfulness finds satisfaction.”<sup>441</sup> Mourning is about achieving separation; the sense of her children will dissipate as their memory grows remote though time, and mourning (grief) is a way of dealing emotionally with the loss of memory as well as flesh. But the speech also contains a sense of relief in that the future will terminate the parade of corpses; only memories fill the void, and the sadness they bring is circumambient. Synge remarks that the grief of the keen “seems to contain the whole passionate rage that lurks somewhere in every native of the island” and in this “cry of pain the inner consciousness” lays “itself bare for an instant.” The women “shriek with pitiable despair before the horror of the fate to which they are doomed.”<sup>442</sup> Succumbing to fate illuminates its Greek aura; but the realism of its setting and language provides its modernism. T. S. Eliot observed that the plays of Synge are “based upon the idiom of a rural people whose speech is naturally poetic, both in imagery and rhythm.” The language of Synge is therefore “not available except for the plays set among that same people,” adding, he “wrote plays about characters whose originals in life talked poetically, so that he could make them talk poetry and remain real people.”<sup>443</sup> Yeats observed that Synge “made word and phrase dance to a very strange rhythm,” yielding “the drifting emotion, the dreaminess, the vague yet measureless desire, for which he would create a dramatic form. It blurs definition, clear edges, everything that comes from the will, it turns imagination from all that is of the present, like a gold background in religious picture, and it strengthens in every emotion whatever comes to it from far off, from brooding memory and dangerous hope.”<sup>444</sup>

The play's tragedy is modern in its urge to find the “tone” of the common people. In this sense the play can be described as “Naturalistic.” Émile Zola asserts that Naturalism is “the return to nature and to man, direct observation, exact anatomy, the acceptance and depicting of what is.” In Naturalism there is “no more abstract characters in books, no more lying inventions, no more of the absolute; but real characters, the true history of each one, the story of daily life.”<sup>445</sup> Synge knew the people of the islands intimately, writing an elegiac

report of their condition in *The Aran Islands*: “As they talked to me and gave me a little poteen and a little bread when they thought I was hungry, I could not help feeling that I was talking with men who were under a judgment of death. I knew that every one of them would be drowned in the sea in a few years and battered naked on the rocks, or would die in his own cottage and be buried with another scene in the graveyard I had come from.”<sup>446</sup> Mary King argues that the play has socialist underpinnings as “a drama of a house divided against itself by the presence of history and time,” exploring as it does the conflict between the community and industrial society. “Because of their poverty,” she says, “and their related need to get a good price for what they sell, the remaining son cannot choose with disinterested freedom his time of departure.”<sup>447</sup> Despite the rough weather, Bartley “must go now quickly. This is the one boat going for two weeks or beyond it, and the fair will be good fair for horses, I heard them saying below” (98). Maurya pleads with him: “It’s hard set we’ll be surely the day you’re drowned with the rest. What way will I live and the girls with me, and I am old woman looking for the grave?” (98). While the play’s strong investment in social orientation for the working poor, and concerns with ordinary folk in the here and now tend to make it a naturalist-socialist tragedy, its lyricism defies the blunt edges and sordidness typifying Naturalist social drama. The play combines the sorrow of a people fated to die a horrible death, their lyrical poetry, and the rhythms inhabiting their sounds and movements. There is an odd congruity here – beauty and morbidity – impressively presented in a landscape of concupiscence and desolation. Maurya’s eidetic speeches are an amalgam of Christian ethos, Nietzschean ritual of infinite sorrow, and stalwart endurance spoken in pitch-perfect tones. Its beauty reflects Kant’s notion of an aesthetic disinterestedness; Maurya’s detached resignation and the acceptance of her fate juxtapose the weighty sorrow that, if overemphasized, could topple the play’s structure into treacle emotions. Her stoicism achieves grace nullifying shrill bombast; her restraint and poeticism affords her admiration. We are at home with a mother so ensconced with the earth that seeing her gives us a feeling of comfort and invasiveness simultaneously. If we stay too long we overstay our welcome; the play’s brevity is in harmony with an elegy that never turns into testimonial.

Synge’s little play thus comes as close to “modern sublime” as any play in modern drama. Sublime, first, demands brevity. Full-length dramas, due simply to their turgidity, fail to capture the subtle and incisive depth of certain experiences. Longinus’s *On the Sublime*, written in late antiquity, notes that the first significant rule of the sublime “is the ability to form grand conceptions,” and second “comes the stimulus of powerful and inspired emotions.” These two elements, he asserts, “are very largely innate,” while additional attributes “are the product of art,” such as “figures of thought and figures of speech, together with the creation of noble diction, which in turn may be resolved into

the choice of words, the use of imagery, and the elaboration of the style.” Finally, he adds “grandeur, which embraces all those I have already mentioned,” creating “the total effect resulting from dignity and elevation.”<sup>448</sup> There is grandeur in Maurya, a poetic method of expression and imagery that illuminates her sublimity. In *Riders* her linguistic sublime is in her description of a child’s death, and in the almost indifferent resignation of fate that Kant called (in an admittedly different context) the “astonishment bordering on terror, the horror and the awesome shudder, which grip the spectator when viewing mountain ranges towering to the heavens.”<sup>449</sup> Kant’s aesthetics brought about by disinterestedness is for Synge something along the lines of Schiller’s romantic idea of suffering, where “The depiction of suffering, in the shape of simple suffering, is never the end of art, but it is very important as a means of attaining its end.”<sup>450</sup> Suffering cannot be sustained for long; sublime pathos can only emerge briefly, intensely, passionately and in richly metaphoric language. Maurya moves with dignity and speaks with imagery, all of which gives her grandeur, but in Synge’s sure hands she never crosses into melodramatic excess. Instead, the sublime arises in the idioms of rustics that possess internal, everyday poetry without pretense to “being” poetry. Whether it is the lonely villages, with their tinkers and tramps, in *The Shadow of the Glen* and *The Tinker’s Wedding*, folklore in *The Well of the Saints*, or farce in *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge’s ear for musicality is grounded in the struggles and conflicts of his folk culture.

Synge paved the way for a modern drama consisting of one-act folk plays and these were especially relevant to the dramas of African Americans during the 1920s and 1930s. (Modern theatre was generally inclined towards the “Little Theatre” movement at the time, with short one-acts dotting the landscape.) The philosopher Alain Locke was deeply impressed by Synge’s folk dramas, writing that African American drama “must have the courage to develop its own idioms, to pour itself into new moulds; in short, to be experimental.”<sup>451</sup> The folk play, he asserts, “must grow in its own soil and cultivate its own intrinsic elements; only in this way can it become truly organic, and cease being a rootless derivative.” The term “soil” is a likely reference to Synge, whose plays are grounded in the earthy peasant milieu. For Locke, Synge should be emulated because he presents “the drama of free self-expression and imaginative release, and has no objective but to express beautifully and colorfully the folk life of the race.”<sup>452</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois likewise admired the Irish theatre movement, but for different reasons. African American theatre should be “propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy,”<sup>453</sup> he says, and adhere to “four fundamental principles” of African American theatre: “*About us. By us. For us. Near us.*”<sup>454</sup>

The tug-of-war between Locke’s realistic folk art and Du Bois’s propaganda would reverberate during the heady days of Harlem Renaissance modernism

and according to Samuel Hay, “Despite their differences, the tenets of the two schools still inform African American drama.”<sup>455</sup> The poet and dramatist Georgia Douglas Johnson (1877?–1966) wrote several one-act plays under the influence of both Locke and Du Bois; her home in Washington, D. C., known as the Halfway House, was a site for black intellectuals and artists to gather and discuss literature, art, and drama.<sup>456</sup> In her best known one-act, *Plumes* (1927), the influence of Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* is evident throughout. The protagonist, Charity Brown, lives in a two-room cottage with her terminally ill daughter. The specter of death looms over the play. Charity awaits the arrival of the doctor, whom she deeply mistrusts. With her friend Tildy, she resigns to the inevitable.

CHARITY: It’s me that’s low sperited. The doctor said last time he was here he might have to operate – said she might have a chance then. But I tell you the truth. I’ve got no faith a-tall in ’em. They takes all your money for nothing.

TILDY: They sho do, and don’t leave a thing for putting you away.<sup>457</sup>

Burial, likewise in *Riders*, is crucial for *Plumes*; Charity decides to forego the operation and use what little money she has left on a dignified funeral. Other similarities come into view: both plays deal with rituals and superstition; with rural poverty and neglect; with dialects; with mothers losing children; and with resignation to fate. *Plumes* and *Riders* form a compelling diptych of two playwrights: Douglas’s combination of lapidary prose and an emotional fine point on grief makes her play, likewise Synge’s, a complex message of heartbreak and survival. *Plums* addresses the political concerns of Du Bois, but within a folk idiom advocated by Locke.

# Chapter 8

## Urban Realism

George Bernard Shaw, wrote Sean O’Casey (1880–1964), “saw that there was desperate disorder in poverty; and he liked order; he saw that there was disease in poverty, and he loved health; he saw that there was death in poverty, and he loved life.” Raised on the same Dublin streets as O’Casey, Shaw’s “resolve first set itself into the young mind to circumvent this satanic trinity of death, disease, and disorder by a fight to abolish poverty for ever and a day; and not by being meek and mild about it.”<sup>458</sup> Much the same could be said for and about O’Casey, too. To the Irish spectators who came to O’Casey after encountering a diet of nationalistic jingoism and jeremiads against England, his plays’ iconoclasm shocked. In his panoramic view of Dublin life, O’Casey depicts characters struggling to survive amidst violent street battles between Catholics and Protestants, or Irish and British. Scenes churn relentlessly as characters traverse barriers, sing ballads, and speak from the heart; bluntness and racy language are scattered throughout; and O’Casey’s acidic attacks on hyperbolic patriotism undermine comforting myths of heroism and bravery. O’Casey’s plays are a squirm-inducing assault on Ireland’s reckless patriotic behavior during its two major conflicts, the Easter Uprising (1916) and the Civil War (1922), as well as the violence in World War I (the last notably in his play *The Silver Tassie*). Irish conflicts were no doubt the result of long, tangled historical roots, justified by, among other things, the relentless siege of British imperialism and forced starvation during the Potato Famine of the nineteenth century. O’Casey, born and raised in the colorful and impoverished streets of Dublin, sympathizes with the rebels, is moved by a socialist inclination, and has an animus against English rule. But he draws an unequivocal line against violence: for him there is no mythic glory in dying for nationalism, no saving grace in sacrificing for one’s country; death is just death, and bullets in particular



("riddled with bullets" is his favorite phrase) are a rather painful reminder that the last living moments of victims are bloody and horrifying. O'Casey unsparingly attacks radical violence on behalf of Irish nationalism, but to describe his attitude as dogmatic or contemptuous is to miss the compassionate and almost rabbinical seriousness that drives his plays. His dramas are replete with earthy, proletariat humor, street slang, lilting argot that comprises his highly-attuned ear for Irish-urban dialogue, and "tapping the idiom of his daily speech," which, according to Herbert Coston, enabled him "to express his profound concern for humanity."<sup>459</sup> If Synge captured the countryside's lyricism, O'Casey's dialogue contains linguistic asperity and celerity. Even his most foolishly patriotic characters are never caricatured, but represent a complexity and integrity despite their puffery. His three Dublin Plays – *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) – are cityscape dramas that take audiences to the heart of people amidst violence and humor, fear and courage, tension and release. "All three plays," Christopher Murray contends, "are bound together by war, its violence and tragic disruptiveness," but O'Casey never presents this one-sidedly; he juxtaposed pathos with humor, and the endings of his plays are "always searingly ironic."<sup>460</sup>

*The Shadow of a Gunman* concerns the would-be poet Donal Davoren and his feigned appearance as a revolutionary gunman. He accepts this pose because it might garner fame and bring him closer to Minnie Powell, whom the peddler Seumas Shields dubs "A Helen of Troy come to live in a tenement" (37). Seumas is a crucial character in O'Casey's corpus; like Fluther Good in *The Plough and the Stars*, he serves as a *raisonneur*, the reasoning friend of the protagonist. His sardonic explanation of the love affair between Donal and Minnie serves as the author's critique of phony heroism:

You think a lot about her simply because she thinks a lot about you, an' she thinks a lot about you because she looks upon you as a hero – a kind o' Paris ... she'd give the world an' all to be gaddin' about with a gunman. An' what ecstasy it ud give her if after a bit of you were shot or hanged; she'd be able to go about then – like a good many more – singin', 'I do not mourn me darlin' lost, for he fell in his Jacket green.' (37–38).

Similarly Joxer in *Juno* says, "It's better to be a coward than a corpse" (84). For O'Casey, ham-fisted brio are shown to be little more than rhetoric, lots of grandstanding and brouhaha but, in the end, ordinary bystanders pay the ultimate price. Raymond Williams comments that O'Casey's plays are working out of a complex condition of loyalty and self-preservation, conflicting emotions that manifest in contradictory words and sudden explosions of verbal inflation that just as suddenly retreat backwards to evasion: "The use of random colour,

of flags, of slogans, of rhetoric and comic inflation, of the sentimental song, of reminiscences of theatre” are “a rush of disintegration, of catching at temporary effects,” whereby “the structure of feeling of the self-exile, still within a connective action” can be “neither avoided nor taken wholly seriously.”<sup>461</sup> The bluster and blarney result from fear and confusion, loyalty to Irish Independence and loathing of violence. Only the women in the play absorb the consequential anguish of the violence, as Mrs. Tancred says in *Juno*:

Me home is gone now; he was me only child, an’ to think that he was lyn’ for a whole night stretched out on the side of a lonely counthry lane, with his head, his darlin’ head, that I often kissed an’ fondled, half hidden in the wather of a runnin’ brook. An’ I’m told he as the leadher of the ambush where me nex’ door neighbour, Mrs. Mannon’, lost her Free State soldier son. An’ now here’s the two of us oul’ women, standin’ one on each side of a scales o’sorra, balanced be the bodies of our two dead darlin’ sons (115).

She is referring to the Irish Civil War, an internecine carnage that left mothers to collect their bloodied sons fighting other sons on Dublin streets. Perhaps his most damning play is *The Plough and the Stars*, because O’Casey is condemning the Easter Uprising of 1916 (a sanctified moment in Irish history) and the playwright daring to make death present onstage. Actors dying onstage has generally been problematic to modern dramatists (though it hardly bothered Shakespeare), because of its potential melodrama and rebarbative laughter in the audience. But in this play the death at the end is laced with a bitter pill; Bessie’s sarcastic vitriol spills out as an attack on the very idea of revolution; and O’Casey is challenging grandstanding heroics. Bessie has begun to take a liking to Nora, whose pining for her revolutionary husband has a ring of contrivance. Nora stands heroically by a window looking for Jack, and when Bessie pushes her away from this vulnerable spot, she falls victim of gunfire: “( *With an arrested scream of fear and pain*), Merciful God, I’m shot, I’m shot, I’m shot! ... Th’ life’s pourin’ out o’ me! ( *To Nora*). I’ve got this through ... through you ... through you, you bitch, you!” (244). Bessie accuses Nora of histrionic behavior, but she is also condemning herself for getting involved. Heroics and compassion are for fools, O’Casey suggesting that only those who step aside live.

*The Plough and the Stars* presents a collage of Dublin life, with a myriad of working-class characters living simple lives amidst travails of war. Jack Clitheroe is a bricklayer and commandant in the Irish Citizen’s Army; his adoring wife Nora (pun on Ibsen?) is his doting wife, prone to acting out Ophelia as she fears for her husband’s safety and who melodramatically burns a letter meant for her husband in an effort to keep him home. The Young Covey, Clitheroe’s cousin, spouts aimless socialist platitudes and the colorful Bessie Burgess, a street vendor, comes to the rescue of Nora (to her demise). O’Casey’s most

vivid character is Fluther Good, a carpenter and tippler whose humanism and humor make him a ballast of reason amidst chaos. Act Two consists of a bar where the Barman, Fluther, Rosie, Bessie, and Mrs. Gogan argue, flirt, and drink while the “Voice of the Man” bellows patriotic drivel through the loudspeaker. Faced with the Young Covey’s socialistic tirades, Fluther says: “It would take something more than a thing like you to flutther a feather ’Fluther. Blatherin’, an’, when all is said, you know as much as th’ rest in th’ wind up!” (196). Fluther’s cynicism is never meant to fall into despair – he has too much vitality to suggest anything like Eugene O’Neill’s down-and-outers in *The Iceman Cometh*; but Fluther has long since divorced himself from the trappings of politics, with its phony utopianism and indiscriminate violence.

The bogus patriotism, tendentious idealism, and Procrustean dedication to nationalism are stripped to the bone and shown to be hollow. It is tempting to compare O’Casey to Chekhov, but a better comparison is Euripides, in that both O’Casey and Euripides believe that those who stick their necks out are decapitated (Minnie or Bessie), while those who keep their heads below the radar live (Fluther). Ronan McDonald calls O’Casey a meliorist – a believer in the human capacity to change things for the better – yet McDonald concedes that “As well as being a commentator on his times, O’Casey is also a symptom of them, and far from transcending or debunking the rhetoric of political ideology, he is traumatized by it.” Although “O’Casey’s strongly Protestant upbringing transmuted into the political zealotry of his adult life” and “as a socialist he believed that human suffering is appalling because it is avoidable,” ultimately “we see O’Casey’s optimism, his belief in utopian solutions to social problems, waver.”<sup>462</sup> O’Casey’s case against violence can render him a one-note dramatist, but his colorful characters and language offset such criticism, and his attempt to frustrate patriotism is universal in its appeal.

# Chapter 9

## Optimistic Passion

If O’Casey was a pacifist while still skeptically supporting Irish Nationalism, George Bernard Shaw was a pacifist with no strings attached. If O’Casey was cynical of politics, Shaw was too optimistic to accept nullifying cynicism. “Optimistic passion” defines Shaw. One of the most well-known writers in the English language – his longevity and personal drive helped keep him in the spotlight – there was hardly a topic Shaw failed to opine on. His dozens of plays can be demanding, with prolix passages of political proselytizing and ponderous inquiries into social conflicts. Yet his writings are often exquisite: lengthy dialogues unfold with eloquence and erudition, and his lines of argument follow a natural course of thought. To call George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) – autodidact, novelist, critic, pamphleteer, essayist, photographer, correspondent, vegetarian, Nobel Prize winner (1925), and terrific self-promoter – “prolific” is the ultimate understatement. He began as a music and drama critic for *The Saturday Review* (1895–1898), ultimately writing sixty-three plays, often clustered in units, such as *Plays Pleasant* (romantic comedies concerning love’s folly), *Plays Unpleasant* (social propaganda plays), *Plays Extravagant*, etc. His significance is in his almost single-handed and relentless attack on the frothy and shallow Victorian stage, turning the conventional well-made play into a venue for social debate. He defended socialism, feminism, and freedom (he wrote for Britain’s Fabian Society from 1884 to 1929), though he was a eugenicist who advocated euthanasia.

Shaw conceived of drama and theatre as a moral institution, akin to the Church in its significance. Drama, he believed, should provoke thought, prompt one’s conscience, elucidate social behavior, fight despair, resist dullness, and serve as a holy temple for the ascendancy of humanity. Fabianism appealed to him because of its “gradualism,” Sally Peters writes, because it was

“revolutionary action wedded to order.” Shaw looked to Fabianism as a promise towards a “brilliantly lit, spotless ethereal world.”<sup>463</sup> His steadfast socialism was often criticized by the left for its pallid Fabianism and the right for obvious reasons. He was never one to retreat from criticism, and his rebuttals are frequently argued with forceful intelligence. “As a Socialist it is my business to state social problems and to solve them,”<sup>464</sup> he wrote in 1942 and every play seems to echo this sentiment. But Shaw’s socialism was essentially trumped by his belief in human passion; for him, “Passion is the stream in the engine of all religious and moral systems.” He opposed the turn-of-the-century vogue of pessimism, which, led by Schopenhauer, “fell into the Rationalist-Mercantilist error of valuing life according to its individual profits in pleasure, and of course came to the idiotic pessimist conclusion that life is not worth living.” Life, Shaw countered, is indeed worth living, however, not for “the fulfillment of moral law or of the deductions of reason, but the satisfaction of a passion in us which we can give no rational account whatever.”<sup>465</sup> Shaw’s idealistic belief in passion was not quixotic; he argues carefully for an acceptance of high and low passions, and it is the obligation of the artist to cull out the better angels. “The tragedy of Hedda Gabler in real life,” he writes in his 1911 “Preface” to the plays of Brieux, “is not that she commits suicide but that she continues to live.”<sup>466</sup> Living on, pushing forward, progressing, and growing are the goals and any obstacle to this progress – either personally or through social constraints – must be contested. As we live we are the product of, and experience, many passions – goodness and greed, altruism and selfishness, etc. – and the point of his plays is the process of sorting out the best and the worst of these. As Martin Meisel contends, his plays are strategies “designed to culminate in a state of feeling, often including uneasiness and unresolved stress, that will effect a permanent change in the consciousness bearing on social change.”<sup>467</sup> Shaw’s Hegelianism incorporated the idea of a dialectic give-and-take aimed at mutual progress, along with the embodiment of passion. Human passions oscillate, producing sacrifice and kindness, greed and malevolence, etc., but all add up to the purpose of Shaw’s teleological goals: to present choices – it is up to us to discern which is the best passion to live by. Eric Bentley says that while Schopenhauer found the will horrifying, “Shaw found it inspiring.” Personal preference is everything for Shaw and optimism “has more validity because it is necessary to continue living. And that life should continue is a presupposition of all moral philosophy.” Humanity’s hope for Shaw, Bentley contends, “is that passions of generosity, restraint, and goodness may prove as strong as those of egoism, aggression, and cruelty.”<sup>468</sup>

This dialectical foundation is evident in Shaw’s early play *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* (1893). Mrs. Warren, a capitalist running brothels in Brussels, Budapest, and Vienna, defends prostitution as a viable alternative to crippling drudgery and low factory wages; her daughter, Vivie, the Shavian

“New Woman,” rebels against her mother’s morally unsound enterprise. “I simply affirm that *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* is a play for women; that it was written for women; that it has been performed and produced mainly through the determination of women that it should be performed and produced; that the enthusiasm of women made its first performance excitingly successful; and that not one of these women had any inducement to support it except their belief in the timeliness and the power of the lesson the play teaches,” Shaw said in 1902.<sup>469</sup> The plot is simple, but powerful: a “Madam,” Mrs. Warren, establishes a bordello to pay for her daughter’s wealthy existence. The climactic scene of Mrs. Warren and her righteously indignant daughter, Vivie, comes down to choices: how to live in a society that provides women scant opportunity. Mrs. Warren defends herself, saying, “Do you think I was brought up like you – able to pick and choose my own way of life? Do you think I did what I did because I liked it, or thought it right, or wouldn’t rather have gone to college and be a lady if I’d had the chance?” To which Vivie replies, “Everybody has some choice, mother” (37). Vivie raises the specter of flower-selling as a choice, which anticipates Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, where the protagonist is a flower-seller uplifted to the middle class by way of Professor Higgins.

Shaw establishes the moral dialectic that would come to reflect his view of drama. “My plays,” he says, “do not consist of occasional remarks to illustrate pictures, but of verbal fencing matches between protagonists and antagonists, whose thrusts and ripostes, parries and passados, follow one another much more closely than thunder follows from lightning.”<sup>470</sup> The setting of a brothel is germane to Shaw’s illustration of capitalism’s financial success against the backdrop of moral opprobrium. Tracy Davis reminds us that the “subject of prostitution was highly relevant to millions of Victorian women whose financial means were insufficient to allow them to survive in comfort or even provide what was necessary for basic substance.”<sup>471</sup> Mrs. Warren’s perorations to her daughter throughout the play stand as arguments for Shaw’s attack on capitalism and his belief in the equality of women. Her daughter’s equally powerful rebuttals establish the Hegelian conflict of ethical dilemmas that would come to define Shavian intellectualism.

*Arms and the Man* (1894) represents the Shavian plays of lighthearted romance, concerning a farcical relationship between two sets of couples, but it is also about conflicting ideals: romanticism and realism. The realist Bluntschli, a mercenary professional soldier, finds himself marooned in the bedroom of Raina, a toothsome idealist who is engaged to Sergius. Bluntschli becomes Shaw’s unlikely cynosure of our sympathy; he carries chocolates rather than bullets and has no compunction against running away from a fight. He is a survivor who chooses life (in much the same way as Mrs. Warren in *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*); survival is all, but not just survival for survival’s sake. Rather, life should be lived to the fullest. Shaw wrote in 1905 that the first version of *Arms*

*and the Man* had no geography – “nothing but a war with a machine gun in it.” His associate Sidney Webb “suggested the Servo-Bulgarian war” of 1886, and Shaw proceeded to adapt the play to this historically specific situation.<sup>472</sup> Bluntschli, the chocolate cream soldier, is the Shavian surrogate, a hardened realist with a sense of humor; Sergius is the idealist whose unpredictable and blundering charge leads to victory. According to every military strategy his suicidal charge in the face of enemy fire should have failed; but its stupidity shocked the opposition and prevails. Sergius is a “hero” but as Bluntschli surmises, his victory is characteristic of war’s chaotic and often uncontrollable outcomes.

Shaw is not writing a debate but rather a romantic comedy. The key relationship is between Raina and Bluntschli, and it is in this exchange that Raina is won:

- RAINA:           (*staring haughtily at him*). Do you know, sir, that you are insulting me?
- BLUNTSCHLI:   I can’t help it. When you strike that noble attitude and speak in that thrilling voice, I admire you; but I find it impossible to believe a single word you say.
- [...]
- RAINA:           (*wonderingly*). Do you know, you are the first man I ever met who did not take me seriously?
- BLUNTSCHLI:   You mean, don’t you, that I am the first man that has ever taken you quite seriously?<sup>473</sup>

With an eye, perhaps, to Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, Shaw creates a knowing and stable relationship, one in which the soldier woos respectfully. All pretenses are discarded; nothing that cannot be touched and felt is to be considered important; and all idealism is illusion. Shaw follows the well-made play formula but subverts expectations; daughter defying the expectations of marriage and reconciliation with her brothel-owning mother, or the anti-heroic common sense of Bluntschli, for example. His characters are often defiant and unconventional, leaving others to gape or rant in outrage at their irreverence. This defiance enabled Shaw, by and large, to reconcile the contradictions of his socialist proclivity and individualism. His great theme, writes Edmund Wilson, “is not a doctrine of social salvation; it is the conflict between one’s duty to society as a unit in the social organism and the individual’s duty to himself.”<sup>474</sup> In extolling socialist and emancipatory ambitions (in his *Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism*, for instance, he was one of the first to demand women’s wages for housework), he also, like Shakespeare, had little faith in mob democracy. This top-down socialism left Shaw in a conundrum; for all his progressivism, he was aware of limitations. His heroines, like Eliza Doolittle and St. Joan, often find their independence but leave the stage at the end

of the plays with little more than Nora does in *A Doll's House* – an assertion of freedom but with negligibly specific contributions to society. V. S. Pritchett says that despite the wit and charm of his plays, they tend to “degenerate into the *longueurs* of debate; farce becomes crude. Devastating in his ability to talk on both sides of the question and to cap or sink his own arguments, Shaw damps us because he talks his way back to the status quo, and leaves the impression that all he has had to say has only verbal importance. We are back where we started.”<sup>475</sup>

Though Shaw has sometimes been referred to as an idealist, he is more in line with the traditions of British Empiricism and common sense. When George Berkeley writes that “Some truths there are so near and obvious to the mind that a man need only open his eyes to see them,”<sup>476</sup> we are coming closer to Shaw’s vision of a vibrant and common sensical worldview. Jonathan Bennett wrote that “Berkeley regarded the doctrine of abstract ideas as not just false but pernicious, productive of error which – he sometimes seems to think – is worse than that of abstractionism itself.”<sup>477</sup> Such skepticism is evident in Shaw’s anti-war play *Heartbreak House* (1919), where a society oblivious to war and its carnage carries on blithely and indifferently. The play follows Shaw’s *Pygmalion* (1914), which deals with class and language. The strata of class society in England gave Shaw an opportunity to accentuate his socialism, but the play’s real tension rests on the sexual attraction between Eliza Doolittle, nineteen years old, and Professor of Phonetics Henry Higgins at forty-nine. Higgins, through a bet, plans to “make a duchess of this draggeltailed guttersnipe,”<sup>478</sup> but the outcome makes him realize that turning her speech around hardly turns around her soul. Where Bluntschli converts Raina to reality, Shaw has matured as a playwright, realizing that characters do not so easily change even when reality stands before them front and center. In Shaw’s essay, “The Illusions of Socialism,” he confirms his new-found complexity: “Do not suppose that I am going to write about the illusions of Socialism with the notion of saving anyone from them. Take from the activity of mankind that part of it which consists in the pursuit of illusions, and you take out the world’s mainspring.”<sup>479</sup> Eliza achieves her independence and leaves at the end to care for herself. It is not hard to see Shaw’s debt to Ibsen’s *A Doll's House*, but Shaw derives his feminism with far less grandstanding than his mentor. Eric Bentley concludes that the play “is Shavian, not in being made up of political or philosophical discussions, but in being based on the standard conduct of vitality and system, in working out this conflict through inversion of romance, in bringing matters to a head in a battle of wills and words, in having an inner psychological action in counterpoint to the outer romantic action, in existing on two contrasted levels of mentality, both of which are related to the main theme, in delighting and surprising us with a constant flow of verbal music and more than verbal wit.”<sup>480</sup>



Shaw modeled *Heartbreak House* on Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard* (subtitled it *A Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes*), where the advances of modernism sweep unnoticed by the characters (or characters in denial). In his preface to the play, "Heartbreak House and Horseback Hall," Shaw notes that Chekhov, "more of a fatalist, had no faith in these charming people extricating themselves. They would, he thought, be sold up and sent adrift by the bailiffs; therefore he had no scruple in exploiting and even flattering their charm." Shaw's goal, by contract, is more critical: "It is said that every people has the Government it deserves. It is more to the point that every Government has the electorate it deserves; for the orators of the front bench can edify or debauch an ignorant electorate at will."<sup>481</sup> Shaw's characters in *Heartbreak House*, Thomas Whitaker observes, are "rhetorical puppets," and while they cannot be mistaken for Chekhov's characteristic depth, "have nonetheless a surprisingly rich vitality." On this stage, Whitaker says, "a heartbroken adolescent can instantly become a cynic on the prowl, a maternal confidante can also be a seductive hostess and an emasculating wife, a philandering lapdog can be a shrewd judge of character and an offstage hero, and a mad hatter can be a mad Lear and a mad Shaw."<sup>482</sup>

For Shaw, the aim of drama is to root out stupidity, convention, stale ideas, and irrational inclinations. He was an unabashed positivist, optimist, empiricist, and believer in a rational world where the mind could, if prompted correctly, guide us towards a better world. Yet he was not naive; he realized that folly and self-delusion are rampant; but he took refuge in the belief that life had a purpose and the point of drama was the dialectical debates in working this purpose out. Shaw would likely agree with Matthew Arnold that culture is an "inward spiritual activity, having for its characters increased sweetness, increased light, increased life, increased sympathy."<sup>483</sup> For Shaw life is a force for improvement and a struggle upward, and he says as much in almost all of his plays, but none more so that in his third-act intervention, "Don Juan in Hell," inserted rather turgidly into *Man and Superman*. According to Don Juan (speaking for Shaw),

That is the working within me of Life's self-consciousness, to higher organization, wider, deeper, intenser self-consciousness, and clearer self-understanding. It was the supremacy of this purpose that reduced love for me to the mere pleasure of a moment, art for me to the mere schooling of my faculties, religion for me to a mere excuse for laziness, since it had set up a God who looked at the world and saw that it was good, against the instinct in me that looked through the eyes of the world and saw that it could be improved (169–170).

Shaw paid very close attention not only to the content and structure of his plays, but to their delivery in print. He understood the market of modernism would commodify his works onstage as well as in book form, realizing, as

W. B. Worthen astutely observes, “the design of the book was not merely part of its packaging for the market: it was a means both to stage the value of modern drama as print literature, and a means to represent the drama in the form of print, to articulate a sense of the play in writing and performance.”<sup>484</sup> Language was his tool, weapon, and machinery for social advancement; his plays, however turgid, would be used as a way to disseminate his political agenda. In the last years of his life Shaw took umbrage at fellow playwright Terence Rattigan’s critique calling Shaw’s plays all talk and mere platitudes. Shaw, irascible to the end, conjured up this retort: criticism of his works, he says, “used to take the form of complaints that my plays are all talk. Now it is quite true that my plays are all talk, just as Raphael’s pictures are all paint, Michael Angelo’s statues all marble, Beethoven’s symphonies all noise.” He continues: “What, then, is the function of the playwright? If he only ‘holds a mirror up to nature’ his vision of life will be that of a policeman on point duty.”<sup>485</sup> Shaw’s megalomania, gothic verbalism, and highfalutin intellectualism often obscured his larger points and creative talent; he was, in Harold Bloom’s analysis, “marred by his garrulous tendencies, and the way he embodied his ideas is too often wearisomely simplistic.”<sup>486</sup> Shaw did not subscribe to the general tendency of modern dramatists towards pessimism and was repelled by what he saw as the frivolous impulse towards avant-garde fictions and theatricalized masks. He was convinced life had a purpose and the will a vehicle in which to live out our goals. This cut against the grain of avant-garde modernism, which generally saw human will as frail, an ambiguous faculty capable of little more than deception, and the theatre as a great place to show how the masks of self-deceptions helped us get through the daily grind. But it can be said with assurance that Shaw deracinated the puffery of nineteenth-century melodrama and the drama of ideas took firm root into the consciousness of modernism because of him.

# Chapter 10

## The Campaign Against Earnestness

If Shaw wanted to strip away pretense, Oscar Wilde cloaked himself in it. Wilde and Shaw shared a mutual admiration, though each quibbled about the other (Shaw was likely jealous of Wilde's talent). They shared, however, much: they were atavistic products of a long line of English comedies (Shakespeare, Johnson, Wycherley, Congreve, Farquhar, etc.); "archenemies of sentimentality,"<sup>487</sup> to borrow John Gassner's words on Shaw; and their wit and *bon mots* reached heights of cleverness and insight in English that only Noel Coward could match. They respected language; it is common wisdom to quote Shawian and Wildean pithy aphorisms that literally sing with insightful acumen. Their strongest weapon against hypocrisy was their prose, arising in either torrential eloquence (Shaw) or devastating brevity (Wilde), and always with muscularity. Their agile and rhythmic repartee is attuned to the cadence of English: ornate without pretension and bending towards the sonorous without being detached from psychology. Shaw and Wilde, at their best, are poets of love who comprehend love's folly and machinations – the extent to which we will go in order to attain our passions.

But they differed in this key point: with Shaw, what you see is what you get; with Wilde, what you see is *never* what you get. Every double entendre and innuendo in Wilde's plays is illustrated and maximized; every japery implies another meaning; and every pose masks the veridical. "The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible," Wilde maintains; "What the second duty is no one has yet discovered."<sup>488</sup> For Wilde, aesthetics is all – it is not something representative but rather the art in itself (though it is not art for art's sake). In his plays everything relies on artifice, on what Michael Levenson calls his "witty campaign against earnestness,"<sup>489</sup> and the artifice for Wilde *is* the "real" (or at least the real art). Wilde was both the product of and sympathetic with

Victorian sincerity and social progressivism; like Shaw he supported a tepid socialism and rallied behind women's rights; but he avoids these problems in his plays. Wilde, Isobel Murray writes, "was intensely suspicious of the means by which even the great writers sometimes made their protests, the rhetoric, the preaching, the moral imperatives, and these weapons in the hands of lesser writers he found terrible indeed."<sup>490</sup> His dandified carapace was, in part, a reaction to the proselytizing and pretentiousness of his era. "In matters of grave importance," Gwendolen says in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, "style, not sincerity is the vital thing" (526). For Wilde, style is aestheticism – and every judgment of art must be measured by it; art is unmoored from reality because art is superior – no sense in copying nature, which is random and therefore "bad" art; and witticism is interjected at every opportunity. Like decorative rococo, comic flourishes, even if they fail to support plot or circumstances, are enthusiastically encouraged. René Wellek argues that "under the glittering surface of Wilde's prose, an ingenious play of mind, and a quick grasp of many verities," arises the difficulty of seizing his work because "he disconcertingly shifts between three often divergent views: pan-aestheticism, the autonomy of art, and a decorative formalism," and each of the three does not "hold his vision steadily."<sup>491</sup> The mannered flippancy and stabbing witticism, however admirable, are sometimes forced, and the retreat to nonsense and back to sense again, while magnificently orchestrated, are occasionally contrived. Yet there is a *sui generis* gift of romantic intrigue and comedic language that holds our attention in ways few playwrights have ever attained.

Wilde was a student of Walter Pater, the Renaissance scholar whose remarks on art bear on Wilde's dramas. According to Pater, the "basis of all artistic genius lies in the power of conceiving humanity in a new and striking way, of putting a happy world of its own creation in place of the meaner world of our common days, generating around itself an atmosphere with a novel power of refraction, selecting, transforming, recombining the images it transmits, according to the choice of the imaginative intellect."<sup>492</sup> For Pater, the sordid fails to elevate; Greek attic art, which he held aloft, is tied to Greek religion and "is at once a magnificent ritualistic system, a cycle of poetical conceptions."<sup>493</sup> Wilde concurs, with a lavish sense of wit and humor. Harold Bloom situates Wilde between Pater and Yeats, "between a doctrine of momentary aesthetic ecstasies, phantasmagoric hard gemlike flames, and a vision of lyric simplification through aesthetic intensity, what Yeats called the Condition of Fire."<sup>494</sup> But Wilde stops short of Yeats's poetic ideals, because Yeats takes art too seriously and nationalism too literally. Wilde maintains a distance from ideals and satirizes their pretensions when he has Gwendolen say: "We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits I am told: and my ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest" (490).

Wilde's language is eloquently sculpted, but the content is deliberately shallow; the game of love is just that – a game, to be played by artifice and panache. The greater the disingenuousness, the deeper the affection.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) is Wilde's most produced and finest work. It arises from a tradition of British comedies, having roots in Congreve's *The Way of the World* in the eighteenth century and a host of other nineteenth-century farce-comedies.<sup>495</sup> Its plot, in Wilde's words, is "slight," but the real "charm" is "in the dialogue."<sup>496</sup> Two idle bachelors, John Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff, plan to woo Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew, respectively, through the imaginary figures of "Ernest" and "Bunbury." John (Jack) poses as Ernest – "my name is Ernest in the town and Jack in the country" (484) – while Algernon calls such shenanigans a confirmed "Bunburyism." Algernon explains: "You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose" (486). Their devices inevitably fall apart, as each tries to woo their respective lovers. The comedy is not, as Wilde rightly says, in the plot, which derives straight through from Plautus to Shakespeare, but rather arises from the cleverness and sheer audacity of the characters. They seem remorseless in their lies, immoral in their tricks, and having an altogether wonderful time trying to worm their way out of their predicaments. William Archer wrote, somewhat sardonically, "What can a poor critic do with a play which raises no principle, whether of art or morals, creates its own canons and conventions, and is nothing but an absolutely willful expression of an irrepressibly witty personality?" The play, he goes on, is "a sort of *rondo capriccioso*, in which the artist's fingers run with crisp irresponsibility up and down the keyboard of life."<sup>497</sup>

The lightheartedness would have sufficed to make this a landmark modernist comedy if all Wilde had presented were two flummoxed couples; but Wilde invents the extraordinary figure of Lady Augusta Bracknell. She is a juggernaut, the "dreadnought society dowager" in Mary McCarthy's words,<sup>498</sup> entering the stage with forceful likeness to Shakespeare's John Falstaff, unrelenting and unforgiving (except at the end, and only then partially), a panjandrum at the center of the play. She is larger than life, which is to say she is a life-force. Wilde, Donald Ericksen remarks, has "succeeded in creating a totally artificial world where form is the beginning and end of things."<sup>499</sup> Not quite an "artificial world" as it is a world populated with people behaving artificially. This is an important distinction, because the world Wilde invents is hierarchical, with Lady Bracknell at the top of the "artificiality." Nothing she says has any direct connection to Philistine concerns or mundane existence. She has built an artificial world and protests against any semblance of sentiment to infect her rarified bubble. Every chance she can she inserts irony as a ballast against

the quotidian; sarcasm to batten down the commonplace; and razor-sharp insights that undercut any semblance of complacency. Her wit is a zone of artifice that keeps a gimlet eye trained on love's foibles and typical English attestations and pretensions.

Wilde's verbal ingenuity contains the buoyancy that has all the earmarks of Restoration wit and was later picked up by Tom Stoppard. His characters gently lift the theatrical atmosphere above the grounded realism of causality and plausibility, but they never wholly detach from circumstances (as in the case of Noel Coward, whose characters, albeit brilliant, sometimes appear too clever to be real and whose humor is more one-liners akin to the American Neil Simon). Eric Bentley summarizes Wilde's artifice and deft drolleries, saying that the play's title reveals it is "about *earnestness*, that is, Victorian solemnity, that kind of false seriousness which means priggishness, hypocrisy, and lack of irony." Instead of a sharp spotlight on the dark recesses of European pretense, Wilde deliberately circumvents it; but through indirection he calls attention to it better than any Shavian frontal assault. "His witticisms are, not comic, but serious relief. They are an ironic counterpoint with the absurdities of the action. This counterpoint is Wilde's method. It is what gives him his peculiar voice and peculiar triumph." The tipping point between seriousness and frivolity is sustained throughout (he never falls into direct satire) by balancing the "assured appearances and inner emptiness." And this was achieved by "bohemianism," which for Wilde was the essential mask. Quoting Wilde, Bentley says, "'A Truth in Art is that whose contradictory is also true. The Truths of metaphysics are the Truths of masks.'" His language, Bentley concludes, "leads us to Pirandello."<sup>500</sup>

# Part IV

## Dissociated Sensibility

*What is the stage? It's a place, baby, you know, where people play at being serious.*

– L. Pirandello<sup>501</sup>

*Even our eyes aren't our own.*

– F. G. Lorca<sup>502</sup>

*The cottage, the go-cart, the Sunday afternoon drives in the Ford, the first rheumatism, the grandchildren, the second rheumatism, the deathbed, the reading of the will.*

– T. Wilder<sup>503</sup>

*In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered.*

– T. S. Eliot<sup>504</sup>

For the playwrights Luigi Pirandello, Federico García Lorca, and Thornton Wilder, masks and veils, disguises and hidden agendas, demarcate the surfaces of their plays like pointillist landscapes. Their common denominator is the underlying isolation, alienation, and metaphysical fragmentation epitomizing, in T. S. Eliot's words quoted above, a "dissociated sensibility." Eliot (a well-established playwright himself) was defining the works of Donne, Milton, and Dryden, but he might as well have defined the three playwrights examined here. For Eliot, the metaphysical poets were consistently amalgamating disparate experiences, taking two or more unrelated experiences and forming new wholes, entreties, and connections. For Pirandello, his plots and the means of conveyance – the theatricality – were mixtures, forming a dissociated sensibility;

Lorca combined a potpourri of theatrical experiences – songs, rituals, dance, music, folklore, and rural superstitions – all dissociated yet combined to form a gestalt; and Wilder, like Pirandello and Lorca, combined theatricality with psychology, interweaving experiences and imaginatively connecting them.

At the risk of over-simplification, their plays share a surface patina that masked lives of quiet desperation. Joseph Wood Krutch, writing about Pirandello, notes that one of the characteristics of modern drama is “the tendency to ‘dissolve the ego.’” Identities are like flotsam and jetsam, present and existing but disguising a deeper passion for something out of reach. This desolation – the splitting, fragmenting, and dispersing of identity – has, according to Krutch, “made us very much aware of inconsistencies and illogicalities in our feeling and conduct, of conflicts and opposing impulses.”<sup>505</sup> We are in the epicenter of modern drama, where ascertaining identity is more puzzle than given, more jig-saw than whole cloth. There is a shared futility in the works of these playwrights, though humor can be perceived amidst grim existence. From their passions bursts forth operatic emotionalism and poetic exuberance; everything in their plays is heightened, melo-dramatized, emotionally charged expressions and linguistic arias. Pirandello’s Italian, Lorca’s Spanish, and Wilder’s English are poetically crafted dialogue, beatified to form a semi-operatic score.

Paradoxically, however, the operatic nature of their plays also epitomized the limited degree to which their dramas could succeed in conveying the larger-than-life anguish. They understood dramatic limitations lodged in the whole edifice of presenting a play. For them, the set of signs they constructed – the language they used or the dramatic structure they employed – suggested counterintuitive reactions. The dramatic counterpoint to the linguistic sign was the game of theatre, its artifice, the cryptic sense of irony that the theatre is not wholly truthful, however much it aims to convey real-life emotions. They established a balancing act of various experiences – realism and avant garde – juggling them, keeping all the balls in the air, while never afraid to throw into the mix the kitchen sink (music, song, poetry, characters in disguise, etc.). They conjoined psychological realism with theatrical panache, mixing traditional family relationship drama that was the mainstay of conventional theatre and crazy-quilted notions of Dada-like insanity that were the bailiwick of the avant garde. For these three it was with experience and not ideology, from life and not theory, that the playwrights ground their action, the realm of lived experience in the moment of “theatre” that truths are gleaned. The experiential immediacy, which will become the fabric of Beckett’s work, derives its place not just as linguistic, but almost anti-linguistic, as if the words succeed and fail simultaneously.



# Chapter 11

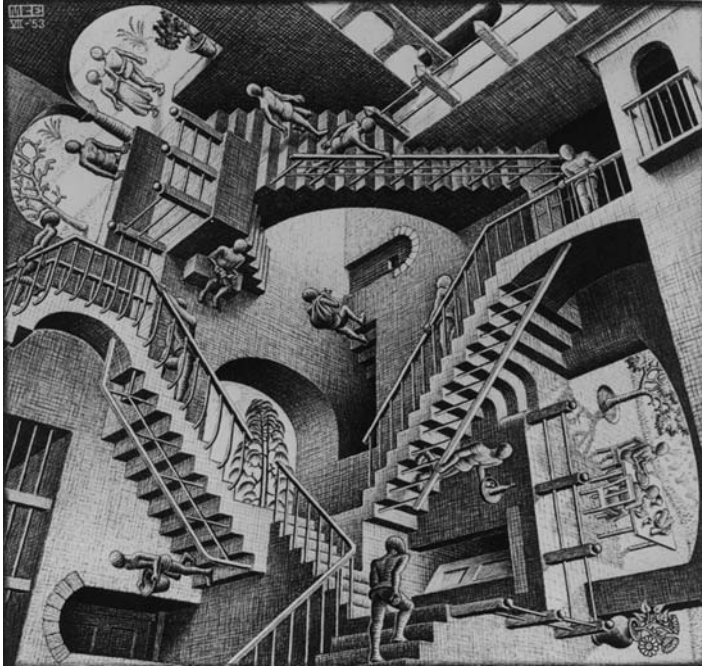
## Distorted Modernism

Rhythm is everything in Pirandello's plays. His dramas undulate between story and theatricality, reality and illusion, surging and receding in tides of realism and avant-gardist rejection of all that is illusionary. The plays move gracefully back and forth between the plot and the absurd – often clashing in a confluence of imaginative writing. If his confidence as a dramatist was any less assured, the plays would appear gimmicky, over-determined, forced, and sophomoric. In some sense his plays *are* gimmicky, but his deft hand at dramaturgy saves them with flashes of humor and psychological profundity. Despite the occasional tongue-in-cheek, the plays of Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936) maintain a steady pulse; he takes us into the world of fourth wall reality only to split it open, removing us from our perceptions of drama, and melting the distinction between actor and character. The plays are rich in epiphanies, studied realizations that we are in a theatre watching a play, and flowing along with a plot. Pirandello creates legerdemain sometimes to the point of being coy, vertiginously rolling the improvisatory dice. His stories are about the contingency of personal memories with theatrical ones, and the impetus is always a movement towards transcendence. The process is what matters as much as the plots. The flow of experience is towards something resembling meaning, a sense of one's place in the theatre, but the ambiguity keeps us at arm's distance. Commenting on his most popular play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (*Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, 1921), Wylie Sypher claims that "These six characters belong to life yet at the same time they do not belong to it; they are like the things Picasso 'assassinated' in the interest of total representation. Their impromptu appearance on the 'legitimate' stage is a double exposure of reality and illusion."<sup>506</sup>

That Pirandello's work circles around the issue of presenting illusion and reality and that he attempts to implant new values in the logic and coherence

of mimesis is hardly new. The bifurcation of reality, the comic phantasmagoria, and the contradictions of life, are metaphors the author himself describes in his work. In his essay "On Humor" (*L'Umoreismo*), Pirandello writes, "Every feeling, thought, and idea which arises in the humorist splits into contraries. Each yes splits itself into a no, which assumes at the end the same value as yes. Sometimes the humorist may pretend to take only one side; meanwhile, inside, the other feeling speaks out to him, and appears although he doesn't have the courage to reveal it. It speaks to him and starts by advancing now a faint excuse, an alternative, which cools off the warmth of the first feeling, and then a wise reflection which takes away seriousness and leads to laughter."<sup>507</sup>

Robert Pippin's remarks, referring to Manet's painting *Scandale, Olympia* (1863), are apropos of *Six Characters*: "Nothing captures better the tone of modernism than this look. It seems to ask the bourgeois viewer (or purchaser): and what, exactly, are you looking for?"<sup>508</sup> Pirandello's *teatro dello specchio* (theatre of the mirror) creates an image that stares back at the audience, like a mirror reflecting back at us in Manet's famous work. Who are the actors? Who are the characters? – the play seems to be saying. Along similar lines, M. C. Escher's fantastical illusions that defy logic share Pirandello's sense of reality and distortion. Are we or are we not in the theatre? Are we or are we not ascending/descending staircases? In Escher, flat planes are distended and appearances are thrown into chaos; in Pirandello, our confidence in what we believe to be relationships is masked, suspended, and complicated. A first glance at Escher's work suggests that the stairs do, indeed, lead somewhere; that there is a realism of sorts unfolding in the movement; it is only after a "double-take" that our sense of reality is thrown helter-skelter. The naive link from the text to the event, or the picture to the image, is mistrusted, not against reality itself but against the usual meaning associated with the concept of reality – the surety that the representation will succeed in illuminating the thing it represents. The crisis of representation that lies at the foundation of modernism was initiated by Pirandello. Modernism – with its simultaneous interest in phenomena and dialectical challenge to phenomena – is at root a challenge to the certainty of mimesis, the confidence of the word's ability to represent the image, the clarity of the gesture, and the hierarchization of reality. Reality has a logic, causality, and sequencing that casts a meliorating cloud over our confusion. It tells us that the world is this way or that, and we embrace the sequential arrangement because the causal ordering assuages our fears of a chaotic universe. Pirandello, like Escher, calls into question this axiological homogeneity – a value-specific uniformity – by stripping the scaffolding of values aligned with sequencing order. The theoretical elaboration of a work of art, Jacques Derrida says, "ought to suspend or at any rate to complicate, with great caution, the naive opening that once linked the text to *its* thing, referent, or reality, or even to some last conceptual or semantic instance." In traditional



M. C. Escher, *Relativity* (1953)

theatre or other arts, Derrida says, mimesis “is lined up alongside truth; either it hinders the unveiling of the thing itself by substituting a copy or double for what it is; or else it works in the service of truth through the double’s resemblance.”<sup>509</sup> For Pirandello, truth is here and elsewhere, at once and the same time in the theatre and in the illusion of reality.

*It Is So! (If You Think So)* (1917), as Pirandello’s biographer Gaspare Giudice remarks, is the first play in which Pirandello comes to grips with “nothingness – not the romantic, constellated abyss or the metaphysical doubts of before, but absurd and irreconcilable nothingness.” For Pirandello, the play is “a nihilistic relativism no longer on a theoretical level, but on a level of everyday life, of social life in the Italian provinces.”<sup>510</sup> If Strindberg’s plays suggest that the dream or illusion is as interesting as reality, or Ibsen’s *The Wild Duck* makes the case that illusions are sometimes more important to humans than reality, then Pirandello’s *It Is So* furthers this hypothesis. The play centers on the assertions that either one of two possibilities exists. Either Ponza, the secretary to the town Prefect, lost his first wife four years ago, and her mother, in order to maintain her sanity, thinks his second wife is actually her (living) daughter; this is why Ponza keeps her sequestered in her fifth floor apartment. Or, the mother-in-law, Signora Frola, says otherwise: it is Ponza who is mad for thinking his

first wife dead (according to her she is not), and he is delusional. Documents proving the truth have been destroyed; we are simply left with “he said/she said,” rendering resolution impossible. Laudisi, the play’s *raisonneur* (or at least a voice trying to make sense of the mess), asks the key question: “What can we really know about other people – who they are – what they are – what they are doing, and why they are doing it?”<sup>511</sup> In Act Two he underscores this condition: “She has created for him, or he for her, a world of fancy which has all the earmarks of reality itself. And in this fictitious reality they get along perfectly well, and in full accord with each other; and this world of fancy, this reality of theirs, no document can possibly destroy because the air they breathe is of that world. For them it is something they can see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and touch with their fingers” (98). In the end, Signora Ponza is called into court only to say “I am she whom you believe me to be” (138). With Pirandello, we are only subject to the phenomenon as we each perceive it. Anne Paolucci contends that reality for Pirandello “is something each of us must define and redefine – not in solipsistic terms but as a shared experience, a conviction that others will recognize and accept from within, with certainty, as Signor Ponza and Signora Frola succeeded in doing, in spite of their seemingly contradictory assertions.”<sup>512</sup> Or, as Eric Bentley says, for Pirandello “truth is relative and subjective, the joke being that people know the truth already since whatever seems to each of them so *is* so.”<sup>513</sup>

One of modernism’s defining traits is a conceptual category predicated on its separation from material and social reality, an artistic institution disassociated with the living practices. With Pirandello, however, we have a dramatist straddling the interstices dividing reality and illusion, avant garde and realism; his dramas are not so much an assault on reality as they are a way of carving out a theatrical space for the inquiry of *reality and illusion* – each entity jockeying for position, making its case, elbowing the other off the stage, and seeking vantage points to trump the other. His is not a straightforward resistance nor an outright capitulation to reality, but rather a momentary equivocation that incorporates elements of both in an unstable synthesis. Robert Brustein summarizes Pirandello’s themes along similar lines: “Life (or reality or time) is fluid, mobile, evanescent, and indeterminate. It lies beyond the reach of reason, and is reflected only through spontaneous action, or instinct. Yet man, endowed with reason, cannot live instinctually like the beasts, nor can he accept an existence which constantly changes. In consequence, he uses reason to fix life through ordering definitions. Since life is indefinable, such concepts are illusions. Man is occasionally aware of the illusionary nature of his concepts; but to be human is to desire form; anything formless fills man with dread and uncertainty.”<sup>514</sup>

Pirandello wrote over forty plays, as well as novels and treatises, becoming one of Italy’s greatest twentieth-century authors (Nobel Prize, 1934). But no play or novel of his overcame his best known work, *Six Characters in Search of*

*an Author*. In the play Pirandello presents imaginary characters who, having materialized in visible shape, force their way into an ongoing rehearsal (of a Pirandello play!), and demand to have their story enacted. The “six characters” challenge the veracity of the actors, who live in a world of pretense and illusion, by presenting “their” allegedly superior story, which they claim is “more” tragic than what the actors intend to rehearse. The stage space becomes a wrestling match between the “actors” and the “characters,” a battleground of wills trying to elbow each other offstage. According to Pirandello, “Mine has been a theatre of war. The war revealed the theatre to me: when passions were unleashed I made my own creatures suffer these passions on the stage.”<sup>515</sup> The “war” is between reality and illusion, fought on the battlefield of scars, wounds, and anguish. Each play – the actors with their play and the six intervening characters with theirs – wants to “take the stage,” as Francis Ferguson puts it, where “the real actors and the director want to take it for their realistic purposes.”<sup>516</sup> It is Hegelian conflict run amok, with the humor located in a send up of Ibsen-Shavian dialectical debate.

We are entering a world of absurdity when the opening stage directions note that the actors enter randomly, “*about to rehearse a Pirandello play*” (212). The self-referentiality immediately challenges an audience’s preconceived notions of theatre. The concept of realism – the objective acceptance of a “reality” that we witness – is no longer on stable ground. We are reminded of Pirandello by Pirandello himself, a not-uncommon trick of theatre used effectively by Molière and French farce. When the “Leading Man” questions the script’s requirement that he wear a cook’s cap for the rehearsal (calling it “ridiculous”), the Manager retorts, “Ridiculous? Ridiculous? It is my fault if France won’t send us any good comedies, and we are reduced to putting on Pirandello’s work, where nobody understands anything, and where the author plays the fool with us all?” (213). We are moving towards Ionesco and the whole edifice of the “theatre of the absurd.”

Upon the arrival of the “family” unit – Father, Mother, Step-daughter, Son, Boy, Child, and Madame Pace, a sort of seventh seal on the six – the challenge facing the acting company and its crew is to decipher the seriousness of the new arrivals, the truth of their tale, and the balancing act between the play intended to be rehearsed, and this new scenario presented by the intruders. They won’t leave the stage until satisfied that some author will script their story – that words will somehow succeed in matching the pathos and tragedy of their lives. The Father makes this point: “But don’t you see that the whole trouble lies here. In words, words. Each one of us has within him a whole world of things, each man of us his own special world. And how can we ever come to an understanding if I put in the words I utter the sense and value of things as I see them; when you who listen to me must inevitably translate them according to the conception of things each one of you has within himself. We think we understand each other, but we never really do” (224).

Andrew Kennedy has remarked that the play casts two conflicting orders of experience: “The pain of role-playing in any life, and the painful limitations of dramatic art.” *Six Characters*, he says, “embodies not only the paradox of art against life, fixity, and happening. It also presents the tension between a play of abundant verbal expression and one that is reduced to a photographic fragment.”<sup>517</sup> The ongoing tension is also between what Umberto Mariani calls an old-fashioned tearjerker “typical of bourgeois theater” and the kind of material “that Pirandello rejected from the very beginning of his career as a playwright.”<sup>518</sup> Pirandello’s six intruding characters bring with them stories ripped from the pages of melodrama: incest of the father with the step-daughter, the child’s witnessing of the parents’ love-making, and the boy’s decision to let his sister drown, prompting his suicide. This seems hardly a rejection of melodrama; in fact Pirandello, in his “Preface” to the play written a few years after the first production, expressed considerable empathy for his six characters, noting that “Creatures of my spirit, these six were already living a life which was their own and not mine any more, a life which it was not in my power any more to deny them.”<sup>519</sup>

In *Enrico IV* (1922), Pirandello explores the concept of madness within the backdrop of his ongoing reality-illusion dialectic. Enrico (Henry), the play’s protagonist, was injured in a fall from his horse, causing him to suffer amnesia for a dozen years. At the time of his injury he and his family partook in an elaborate medieval pageant, in which Henry assumed the character of Emperor Henry IV (1050–1106), known for his ongoing struggles with Pope Gregory VII. At the time of the injury another youth, Tito Belcredi, who was Henry’s rival in love with the Marchioness Donna Matilda, poked Henry’s horse, provoking the fall. Though at first Henry seemed unharmed, his injury resulted in him believing he really was Henry IV. The family humored him until the malady passed, yet after twelve years Henry, regaining awareness, decides to maintain the mask of his illusion consciously. After eight years of this charade, Henry’s flame, Donna Matilda, marries, becomes a widow, and is now Belcredi’s mistress. At the start of the play Matilda, Belcredi, Doctor Genoni (an “expert” on mental illness), and others attend to Henry, suspecting that he is nearly “cured.” For a time everyone assumes their roles for Henry, fearful that a sudden “awakening” might be detrimental to his health. The party of visitors disguise themselves in the appropriate medieval clothes. The Doctor’s plan is to dress Matilda’s daughter in the exact clothes Matilda wore twenty years ago in an effort to “shock” Henry out of his stupor. The ruse fails. Henry inveighs against all those that surround him, clinging to his disguise, and calling into question the very idea of a cure.

In the final act Henry admits to his malady, and admits further that he maintained the guise of madness in order to deal with the world. There are intimations of autobiography; Pirandello’s wife was institutionalized and for

much of his life he cared for her. But there is more; Pirandello characteristically is investigating the nature of madness in the modern, and for him, senseless world. Pirandello's "disassociation of sensibilities" is deliberate in light of jealousy and betrayal. Henry has turned his madness into art; his costumes, fantasies, and performances are his vicarious ways of pitching time backward to medieval Romanticism. Evoking Nietzsche, Van Gogh, and Artaud as emblematic of artistry and madness, Michel Foucault writes that in modernism madness is the moment of truth that both affirms and abolishes madness; it is a place of licensed chaos, Nietzschean ludic unrestraint: "Nietzsche's madness – that is, the dissolution of his thoughts – is that by which his thought opens out onto the modern world." Foucault does not suggest that madness alone is the key to the modern world, but rather, "it means that, through madness, a work that seems to drown in the world, to reveal there its non-sense, and to transfigure itself with the features of pathology alone, actually engages within itself the world's time, masters it, and leads it; by the madness which interrupts it, a work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself."<sup>520</sup> By incorporating history as a backward process – by bringing history into the present and the present into the past through Henry's will – Pirandello is using art, artifice, and the clash of illusion and reality to create some kind of ordered existence in a world in flux. Jerome Mazzaro observes that the "absence of a traditional external model of reality for memorial order leads to the reliance on artifice, arbitrary, conjectural, and metaphorical models," the selfsame metaphors of Henry's "character" of Enrico IV that enables him to function, as Mazzaro puts it, on "the two dominant metaphors of his day – William James' view of consciousness as a stream and Henri Bergson's image of memory's integrating process as a kind of telephone switchboard operation."<sup>521</sup> The flow of life is interrupted, upended, mocked, turned around, and tossed back at us in streams of consciousness made loopy and topsy-turvy.

Pirandello's work bears the frequent criticism that his one-note theme of reality versus illusions is elongated throughout his career. While true, his revolutionary work was, at the time, a bold modernist usurpation of conventional drama. The "Pirandellian" effect on modern drama is to fuse the grave and the absurd, the body blow and the joke, the nightmare and the fickle daydream. His plays are flippant, coy, and irreverent, while deadly serious simultaneously. Pirandello owes much to *commedia dell' arte*, with its antic zanies and characteristic feature of stereotypic popinjays. Like *commedia*, Pirandello strips away our pretenses and the illusion (delusion, really) of our superiority. But ultimately Pirandello's contributions to modern drama reside in the way he fashions consciousness – how we perceive ourselves and our place in the world. The affliction of modern consciousness for Pirandello, writes Anthony Caputi, "was that it had lost the focus that inherited cultural structures had made

possible for many centuries: it lacked the means to order, define, and regulate the data of experience; the familiar categories, the time-honored distinctions, the unexamined standards and loyalties that had given shape and meaning to experience had been lost. The crisis of modern consciousness consisted in its need to discover a new idea of itself and of the world, a way to structure itself that would enable it once again to derive values coherently.”<sup>522</sup>

Pirandello builds on traditional drama’s gravitas – the seriousness of dramatic conflict and emotional upheaval – but adds ludic anarchy to highlight the absurdity of our existence. His dramas capture what occurs when the ordinary flow of life is interrupted. As he says, we might want to “keep coherent all the fictions we create, the condition and the status in which we try to establish ourselves,” but “During certain stormy moments, inundated by the flow, all our fictitious forms collapse ignominiously.”<sup>523</sup> This is because for him, the modern world has no certainty that pre-modern worlds possessed: “Life is a continuous and indistinct flux and has no form beyond that which we from time to time give it, infinitely variable and continuously changing.”<sup>524</sup> Despite humor, Pirandello is pessimistic. For him, reality is a false template couched in denial. The cosmos is fractured into invisible objects by our limited vision. We move through time, and thus our thoughts are time-conscious; but the world is otherwise – unknowable and fraught with surprises. We are out-of-joint with nature and the universe, and our actions foolishly try to set it right. A similar sense of the conflict between conformity and rebellion permeates the greatest Spanish dramatist of the modern era.



# Chapter 12

## Lyrical Modernism

Federico García Lorca's "rural" trilogy of Spanish life comprising *Blood Wedding* (*Bodas de Sangre*, 1932), *Yerma* (1934), and *The House of Bernarda Alba* (*La Casa de Bernarda Alba*, 1936) was deeply influenced by his opposition to authoritarianism and his pessimistic view of any ability to overcome it. Lorca (1898–1936) was part of the "Generation of 27," a disparate group of Spanish authors brought together by a shared dissatisfaction with contemporary Spanish literature. While the movement was principally invested in "art for art's sake" characteristic of modernism, Lorca was also a social crusader whose efforts on behalf of the Spanish peasantry ultimately cost him his life (he was executed by the Fascists). The Generation of 27 (a reference to the three hundredth anniversary of the Spanish poet Luis de Góngora) were largely Republicans at odds with the reactionary Falange movement, a clash that would inevitably lead to the bloody Spanish Civil War.

While politics and folk culture certainly influenced him, Lorca was attracted to the avant garde. "Lorca's springboard may have been the folktales and stories of his childhood," writes Melia Bensussen, "but by his teens he was enthralled by the forces of the avant-garde beginning to flourish in 1920s Spain, and particularly by the Surrealists."<sup>525</sup> The groundswell of modernist influences that informed Lorca's work can be located in his close friendships with surrealist painter Salvador Dalí and filmmaker Luis Buñuel. According to Maria Delgado, Lorca met Dalí at Madrid's *Residencia de Estudiantes*, "a student boarding house to the north side of the city modelled on Oxbridge's college system." Lorca joined the *Residencia* in 1918, remaining until 1928 and absorbing "its progressive ethos and celebration of the edifying potential of culture." The excitement generated by the *Residencia*, Delgado maintains, proved "seminal to the genesis and evolution" of the "Lorca-Dalí-Buñuel axis."<sup>526</sup>

Lorca absorbed the ascendancy of modernism in pan-Hispanic art and literature. According to Rafael Maya, the psychological influences of Zola and the French Naturalists contributed to pan-Hispanic artistry, especially Zola's early works exploring the psychologically damaged figures in his plays and novels. However, for the Spanish artists "there was a series of psychic phenomena, hidden to classical analysis, that constituted profound and permanent modifications in the human conscience. No psychologist, nor doctor, nor moralist, had studied, up to that time, the infinite forms of boredom, the escapist obsession, the inner anguish, manic depressiveness, delight in the artificial and the exotic, sentimental aberrations, paralysis of the will, moral agony, erotic sadism, the paradoxical synthesis of mysticism and sensuality, the morose predisposition toward persistent daydreaming, etc.," that constituted the focus of Spanish artists at the time.<sup>527</sup> Lorca's work is a mixture of psychological realism and poetic expression, a mash-up of Freudian modern psychology and avant-gardism in aesthetic practice. He uses the foundationalism of realistic-psychological depictions and certainty of time and place (especially the colorful locale of rural Spain), but releases his drama from an earth-bound naturalism by incorporating poetry, song, music, symbolism, and folklore. Lorca was a product of Spanish drama's rich history, with its Golden Age tradition (1500–1700) spearheaded by Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca. From Lope he absorbed the rustic folk poetry of everyday speech, the importance of spectacle, and a heightened visual and musical supplement to the dramatic dialogue; from Calderón he drew on the importance of symbolism, respect for honor, and the ever-looming idea of death. But his was a modernist version of these playwrights, rejecting Catholicism's rigidity and drawn to experimentation. The main characters in his three major plays are women, because (like Ibsen) he saw in the female a resistance to the status quo.

*Blood Wedding*, his first success, is a bubbling cauldron of a play, part Greek chorus, folk music, dance, symbolism, magic realism, and a dynamic mix of romance and spontaneous violence that would characterize Lorca's major dramas. Most importantly it is a play about repressed passion, conflicts between desire and tradition, urgent needs and social constraints. The play opens on the morning in a room "painted yellow," a foreboding symbol in Spanish culture. When the Bridegroom (*Novio*) enters he sees his Mother, who offers him breakfast. He declines and asks for a "knife," foretelling the dark inevitability of the play. His request for the knife is at first benign – he will use it to cut and eat grapes in the vineyard where he works – but his Mother replies, "Knives, knives. Cursed be all knives, and the scoundrel who invented them" (34). Following the funeral of her husband and other sons, the Mother fears for the life of her only child. The Bridegroom tries to avoid the conversation, but she persists:

- MOTHER: Everything that can close a man's body. A handsome man, full of young life, who goes out to the vineyards or to his own olive groves – his own because he's inherited them ...
- BRIDEGROOM: (*lowering his head*) Be quiet.
- MOTHER: ... and then that man doesn't come back. Or if he does come back it's for someone to cover him over with a palm leaf or a plate of rock salt so he won't bloat. I don't know how you dare carry a knife on your body – or how I let this serpent (*She takes a knife from the kitchen chest*) stay in the chest (34–5).

The darkened mood is offset by folk music, but nothing can offset the sexual tension that exists between the Bride (*Novia*) and Leonardo (the only character with a non-symbolic name, he is identified with the image of a lion). Though he is already married and the Bride is engaged to the Bridegroom, their attraction boils over in Act Two when Leonardo says “to burn with desire and keep quiet about it is the greatest punishment we can bring on ourselves.” Her passions, too, are inflamed: “I can't listen to you. I can't listen to your voice. It's as though I'd drunk a bottle of anise and fallen asleep wrapped in a quilt of roses. It pulls me along, and I know I'm drowning – but I go on down” (60). For Lorca, unbridled passions lead disastrously to a violent confrontation between Leonardo and the Bridegroom. Tennessee Williams, who owed much to Lorca, wrote in his *Notebook* of similar desires and in a similarly poetic stream of consciousness: “I think almost continuously of K. – Memories – dreams – longings – little hopes and great desolations – Will he ever come back? Can there – will there be someone else? Or will I always be walking around streets at night alone. Standing wearily in front of bright windows? Wondering where to go, what to do, when only someone I loved could give real direction in which to move.”<sup>528</sup> The same could be said of the Bridegroom, and for Lorca himself. Saturated by conservative Catholicism and repression, Lorca's homosexuality was not merely at odds with society, it was potentially lethal. Lorca wrote that the “theatre is a school of weeping and of laughter, a rostrum where men are free to expose old and equivocal standards of conduct, and explain with living examples the eternal norms of the heart and feelings of man.”<sup>529</sup> This remark expresses his sexual passions bottled up in and by an unfriendly culture. In his essay “Theory and Play of the *Duende*” (“Teoría y Juego del *Duende*,” 1931), the *Duende* (goblin or demon that the artist must confront to claim his or her muse) is a “force not a labor, a struggle not a thought.” It “surges up, inside, from the soles of the feet.” It lives “in the veins,” and its meaning is “of the most ancient culture of immediate creation.”<sup>530</sup> Lorca invests in the poetics of blood and land, in the body and soul of his three plays, what he called a “*trilogía dramática de la tierra española*” (“dramatic trilogy of the Spanish earth”). According to Edward Honig, “Lorca was exploring the primitive dramatic structure, the Catholic mass, the tribal ritual,

and attempting thereby to create a tragic form which might fit the modern condition without relinquishing the spontaneity of the ancient.”<sup>531</sup>

Lorca's *Yerma* is, like *Blood Wedding*, a disassociated sensibility of passion and repression, though it, too, moves along the path of its central character's quest for a child. The robust but barren Yerma asks, “Why am I childless? Must I be left in the prime of my life taking care of little birds, or putting tiny pleated curtains at my little windows?” (112). Frustration reaches a crescendo with her husband, Juan, in ways reminiscent of Strindberg's battle of the sexes. But Lorca departs from Strindberg in his attempt to capture the peasant folk, their ways and manners, their language and passions, similar to Yeats, Synge, and O'Casey's efforts to forge a nationalist theatre. *Yerma* creates a rustic motif through the everyday existence of Yerma, her husband, and the peasants. Her fallowness is matched by the spiritual vacuity around her; she is trapped in a marriage she never wanted, with a man who does not love her, and subsists in a world that shuns her for her shortcoming. She sees her fellow women of the town tending to babies, exacerbating the emptiness of her life and the narrowness of possibilities. Her remark to her husband echoes Nora in *A Doll's House* – “Men get other things out of life: their cattle, trees, conversations, but women have only their children and the care of their children” (129) – but childless, she can neither enjoy the fruits of birth and upbringing nor even the possibility of condemning that life. She is trapped in an existential void, her desperation coursing through the play. She is teeming with desires she cannot hope to satisfy. Lorca is acutely aware of how societal expectation, inner passion, and the grueling progression of time press against his protagonist's psyche. We strive after happiness, Freud tells us, and what is called happiness “in its narrowest sense comes from the satisfaction – most often instantaneous – of pent-up needs which have reached great intensity, and by its very nature can only be a transitory experience.” By contrast, suffering, he says, “comes from three quarters: from our own body, which is destined to decay and dissolution, and cannot even dispense with anxiety and pain as danger-signals; from the outer world, which can rage against us with the most powerful and pitiless forces of destruction; and finally from our relations with other men.”<sup>532</sup> Yerma's Freudian sufferings are contained in her body, cultural pressures, and relationship with her unloving and untrusting husband. In Act Three a drunken Juan accuses Yerma of deceit; in her defense, she inveighs against him:

I won't let you say another word. Not one word more. You and your people imagine you're the only ones who look out for honor, and you don't realize my people have never had anything to conceal. Come on now. Come near and smell my clothes. Come close! See if you can find an odor that's not yours, that's not from your body. Stand me naked in the middle of the square and spit on me. Do what you want with me, since I'm your wife, but take care not to set a man's name in my breast (142).

The visceral images of body, smells, sweat, odor, and public display of passion recalls a rich Spanish folk tradition. As Lorca's brother Francisco García Lorca contends, *Yerma* raises a "confluence of traditional Spanish theatre tendencies" achieved in the congeries of a "classic conception, toward which the poet turned his eyes in search for simplicity and sobriety. It is already expressed in the very title, *Yerma* – 'barren.' An invented name, symbolic, univocal, which answers the play's conception in a perfect fashion."<sup>533</sup> Her final act of murder is fleshed out logically, sequentially, through the razor-sharp focus of a caged character using her rage to release her tension. Though the murder of her husband is hardly condoned, Lorca lets Yerma admit her guilt by crying to the gathering townspeople, "I've killed my son. I myself have killed my son!" (153). Yerma has done everything she can to conceive a child (elixirs, prayers, counseling from elders), and her final act is operatic in its tone and execution.

Gordon Rogoff contends that Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* "is an opera without music, and therefore not a good play."<sup>534</sup> I would suggest that the play, Lorca's third in the triptych dealing with rural Spanish life, is good by *virtue of its being pseudo-operatic*. In the play Lorca's Castilian, peasant earthiness creates operatic feelings that do not hesitate to tear a passion to tatters. *Bernarda Alba* is also the most realistic of his *oeuvre*, what Dennis Klein calls his "tightest work" where "not a word is wasted."<sup>535</sup> The play opens with Lorca's stage direction, in "A very white room in Bernarda Alba's house" (157), and this starkness – with everyone dressed in black mourning – emblemizes the bleaching of colorful emotions and sexual passions. The whiteness of virginity and blackness of mourning reverberates throughout the house, where, to borrow Gaston Bachelard's words, "our house is our corner of the world."<sup>536</sup> But this is a corner ruled by Bernarda Alba, whom the maid Poncia calls at the beginning of the play a "Domineering old tyrant!" (157). Bernarda has five daughters – Angustias, Magdalena, Amelia, Martirio, and Adela – ranging in ages from thirty-nine to twenty, and each is kept tightly reigned within the orbit of the mother's watchful eye. Though Bernarda makes every effort to contain her daughters, the youngest Adela has an affair with the husband of the Angustias, Pepe el Romano. Lorca keeps Pepe and the affair discreetly offstage, allowing the drama to unfold solely amongst the women.

Bernarda's very first words to the servants, "Silence!" and "Less shrieking and more work" (161), indicate her tyrannical control – but also her lack of control. For however much she calls for silence, the other characters keep talking, moving, chattering, contesting, battling, and defying her. Her world is spiraling out of control, first with the death of her husband (the play opens with funeral plans) and then with her sexually awakening daughters. She tries to maintain order and authority, but her uphill struggle is thwarted on every side by unruly off-springs. Many critics view the play as a parallel attack on

Spain's rising fascism; Bernarda Alba is indeed authoritarian, a ruthless bully who prevents her daughters from romance and marriage to the local peasants she considers beneath them. Maria Delgado notes that the play "is built on the premise of negation," revealing "a social microcosm representative of a wider body politic" at a time "when the country was facing the distinct possibility of a military coup and a return to dictatorship."<sup>537</sup> But to see the play solely this way is to miss Lorca's subtle portraiture of the matriarch and the repression against women as a whole. When Amelia says to her sister Martirio that a neighbor, Adelaida, was not at the funeral of their father, Martirio reports the story of Adelaida's father and his murder. When Amelia asks why he was able to get away with the brutal crime, Martirio says, "Because men help each other cover up things like that and no one's able to tell on them" (169). Amelia will later say, "To be born a woman's the worst possible punishment" (185). This story reflects a way to consider Bernarda, too. Bernarda, albeit dictatorial, is alone, without male support in an unrelenting patriarchal culture and with only the inheritance on which to survive. Throughout the play she is overbearing to her daughters, servants, and anyone defying her authority, but her justification for this behavior is not entirely without merit. She must contain her daughters in a world where women's survival depends on restraint. Lorca has doubtlessly created in Bernarda a power magistrate who blocks unbridled passions; "The white dress, the white coffin, the white virtue, the white death," writes Edward Honig, "are the negative counterparts to the blood-throbbing mating of horses, the full-blooded peasant boy fleeing in the forest, and the torrents of blood staining the earth in *Bodas de Sangre*."<sup>538</sup> As much as she is brutal, however, Bernarda also knows the price to be paid for a woman alone, or a woman dependent on a man's wages to survive.

BERNARDA: I know my destiny! And my daughters! The whorehouse was  
for a certain woman, already dead ...

PONCIA (*fiercely*): Bernarda, respect the memory of my mother!

BERNARDA: Then don't plague me with your evil thoughts! (192).

The servant Poncia was born of a prostitute and Bernarda knows the limits of women in a patriarchal society. She tenaciously imprisons her daughters, forcibly directing them to whom and when they should marry. But to see her as a one-dimensional termagant is to miss her complexity. "No one's going to fetch and carry for me," she proclaims (194). Her stubbornness leads to her daughter Adela's suicide and this is unforgivable. But Bernarda also knows her world of men, gossip, reputation, honor, and social position; to control she must dig in, despite the cost. The walls she erects, actual and metaphoric, are meant to protect her family and keep the land, even if her daughters loathe

her. Lorca is not condoning her, but neither is she a caricature of evil. Although mean-spirited, Bernarda nonetheless is a prisoner of her world, too – a world that shows no mercy. Like her daughters, she is trapped in conforming traditions that have been passed down to her through centuries of Catholicism and strict social codes. That she defends these codes and is defined by them demonstrates how tragic her disassociated sensibilities are.

# Chapter 13

## Sentimental Modernism

In his biographical description of Pirandello, Eric Bentley referred to the Italian term “*Pirandellismo*,” meaning the pervasive influence of Pirandello’s theatre on modern drama. For instance, Italian audiences, upon seeing Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, conjured the term *Pirandellismo* to indicate Miller’s use of flashbacks and illusion. But for Bentley, “An American playwright much more likely to have been directly influenced by Pirandello is that avid reader and linguist, Thornton Wilder.” Wilder’s interest in commentators and play-within-a-play motifs “provide a world where reality itself is a maze in which we are lost (only a god can see a maze from above, and the gods are dead) suggesting that he may have known his Pirandello before writing *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*.”<sup>539</sup> In Wilder’s essay “Some Thoughts on Playwriting” (keeping Pirandello in mind), he says, “The stage is fundamental pretense and it thrives on the acceptance of that fact and in the multiplication of additional pretenses. When it tries to assert the personages of the action ‘really are,’ really inhabit such and such rooms, really suffer such and such emotions, it loses rather than gains credibility.”<sup>540</sup> Like Pirandello and Lorca, Wilder mixes realism and surrealism, naturalism and lyricism, never content with one form or the other, but rather freely draws from a disassociated sensibility. Wilder, like Lorca, depicts characters straining against moral codes imposed on them. In many ways Wilder is a mixture of two great American painters, Norman Rockwell and Jackson Pollock: his folksy characters, especially in *Our Town* (1938), and his sly humor in *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942), mirror Rockwell’s portraiture of everyday Americans at work and play, yet his characters break out of convention and, especially in the Stage Manager of *Our Town* and Sabrina in *Skin*, employ abstract Expressionism and free-flowing form. Wilder exemplifies



both the Rockwellian desire for safety and security as much as the Pollock-like oppositional need for flight and rebellion.

Above all, memory, in Wilder's un-regenerating landscape, is often the only thing his characters have to get them through the winter of their discontent. His characters cling to memory like a lifeline beating back their existential void. Wilder, like Pirandello and Lorca, locates threads in his plays along the meridian of suspension between the present and the past, this world and the dream. His plays live in the liminal interstice between certainty and uncertainty, grounded reality of everyday life and the otherworldly shadow that hangs above each character's life. The pseudo-narrators are tour guides into lives that float rather than run, replete with people searching the past for clues to live by that hopelessly fall short of expectations. Wilder's canny use of narrators in these two plays is one of the ways he achieves his breakout from realism, but this is hardly the main reason for his folksy theatricality. He achieves his balancing act of realism and theatricality through the vast changes his characters experience over time, which bubble to the surface in forceful rejections of norms and conventions. Take Henry's speech to his father in *The Skin of Our Teeth*:

Try what? Living *here*? – Speaking polite downtown to all the old men like you? Standing like a sheep at the street corner until the red light turns green? Being a good boy and a good sheep, like all the stinking ideas you get out of your books? Oh no. I'll make a world, and I'll show you (236).

For Wilder, there is a chasm between reality and expectation, between life and desire, creating a metaphysical distance where nothing hangs together. His characters are attracted and repulsed by each other, forcing them to experience an immense willpower to cross the landscape that divides them. The ending of *Our Town*, for instance, is successful because of the build up to it, and once we arrive at the gravesite Wilder gives us, in piercing simplicity, what it feels like to have lived a meaningless life: the sense of utter erasure, notable by the graves marking people's voices, once making noise, now unheard. Wilder provides a soundless personal abyss that shrouds his characters in an almost heroic stature. They hardly put up a fight against their aimlessness and vapidity; in fact, the emptiness is hardly mentioned. Yet there it is, just beneath the surface. There is in Wilder an enduring charm, despite (or perhaps because of) its lonely sensibility.

*Our Town* occurs in Grover's Corner, New Hampshire, having all the earmarks and flavor of a New England town at the beginning of the twentieth century; yet it could, with a twist here and there, represent any American town at the time. Wilder eliminates much of the scenery and props necessitating a realistic stage, thereby giving the play a universalism. The play's time-span runs from 1901 to 1913, and the movement of time is an essential facet of the play. The basic plot deals with two neighboring households, the Gibbs and Webb

families, whose lives are routinized and un-dramatic. But the un-eventfulness is deceptive; the “Daily Life,” as the first act is described, proceeds through a single day, fleshing out the poignancy of the commonplace, enriched by children doing homework and deliveries of milk and newspapers marking the arc of time. There is an underlying tension, a sense of foreboding to come, despite the pleasantries. Twenty-two characters pass across the stage, interweaving through the Gibbs and Webb households, but the main story is the sweet romance of the households’ children, George and Emily. At the play’s end Emily dies in childbirth after nine years of marriage, and George, who cannot see Emily (she, like others, returns from the dead), grieves beside her grave. The pathos is marked by Emily’s words.

EMILY: *(In a loud voice to the Stage Manager)*. I can’t. I can’t go on. Oh! Oh! It goes too fast. We don’t have time to look at one another. *(She breaks down sobbing. At a gesture from the Stage Manager, Mrs. Webb disappears.)* I didn’t realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back – up the hill – to my grave. But first one more look. Good-by. Good-by, world. Good-by Grover’s Corner ... Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking ... and Mama’s sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths ... and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you. *(She looks toward the Stage Manager and asks abruptly, through her tears)*. Do any human beings realize life while they live it? – every, every minute?

STAGE MANAGER: No. *(Pause)* The saints and poets, maybe – they do some (110).

Time’s significance runs through Emily’s speech, marking the ephemerality of existence. Like the theatre itself, with its fleetingness and certainty only in the moments enacted, Wilder is imploring us to appreciate life’s delicacies, what Malcolm Goldstein calls Wilder’s “belief that the cause of man’s unhappiness is not his failure to achieve or sustain greatness, but his failure to delight in the beauty of ordinary existence.”<sup>541</sup>

*Our Town*’s enactment of defiant individualism – characters who represent solitary seekers bent on nineteenth-century missionary work – which has characterized American exceptionalism for decades, recalls the similar “promised land” zeal that Alexis de Tocqueville observed in his *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville marveled at America’s intense religiosity, provincial decentralization, and laser-like focus of small townships as they managed affairs and organized committees. He was impressed by America’s get-up-and-go entrepreneurial spirit and the admirable citizenry participating in every crevice of American government. Tocqueville particularly noticed this participatory democracy in New England, where the New Englander is attracted to his township “because

he sees the township as a free, strong, corporation of which he is part and which is worth the trouble of trying to direct." The township "is shaped to form the nucleus of strong attachments, and there is meanwhile no rival center close by to attract the hot hearts of ambitious men."<sup>542</sup> But Tocqueville also recognized, likewise Wilder, the stifling conformity and uniformity, xenophobia and repressive majority in American collectivism that suffocated anything out of the ordinary. For all its lip-service to "rugged individualism," there is in America a magnetic force tenaciously beholdng to convention and herd mentality, with any breakthrough in *Our Town* requiring herculean effort. Wilder is adamant when he says it is not "a speculation about the condition of life after death." Rather, "it is an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life," where "Each individual's assertion to an absolute reality can only be inner, very inner."<sup>543</sup> The bare stage he demands (much like Pirandello and Lorca) is meant to strip away theatrical artifice, and for all his heightened theatricality (actors talking directly to the audience) his theatre is an attempt to get into the mind of the characters and ferret out their desires and fears. The characters' lives intertwine, love and romance pass by, until we are met in the third act of *Our Town* with the specter of death; only then can the chains of conformity be broken: "*The dead do not turn their heads or their eyes to right or left, but they sit in a quiet without stiffness. When they speak their tone is matter-of-fact, without sentimentality and, above all, without lugubriousness*" (87).

Grover's Corner is moving steadily albeit trepidatiously into the modern age. The characters have moved about in the first two acts partly oblivious to the passage of time, and partly swept up by it. Either way, they have failed to live their lives fully. At the graveyard the Stage Manager informs us that "an awful lot of sorrow has been quieted down up here" (89) – the distinct idiom of quaint Americanisms located in the phrase "down up" exemplifies localized vernacular found here and in Pirandello's Italian and Lorca's Spanish, too. Emily comes to the graveyard with, as Wilder says, "*mounting urgency*." She tries to reach out to her parents, who cannot hear her: "Oh, Mama, just look at me one minute as though you really saw me. Mama, fourteen years have gone by. I'm dead. [...] Mama, just for a moment we're happy" (109).

These fleeting moments of happiness are an oasis in a play replete with cleaning, cooking, knitting, packing, mowing the lawn, delivering papers and milk, passing out school paper assignments, singing choral songs – events attentive to every detail, yet avoiding the most important detail of all: human bonding. There is little ambiguity in Wilder's work; the avoidances, deflected moments of connections and missed opportunities are located squarely in view. *The Skin of Our Teeth*, a cartoonish epic that deconstructs a family's history from their perspective in New Jersey and a wide-angle portrait of the world as it rumbled into the post-World War II era of materialism, also comes to a melodramatic ending in the third act, where the father and son have their dénouement.

The haltingness and repeating of scenes in *The Skin of Our Teeth* suggests the theatre itself, where the director stops and starts until satisfied. But the haltingness comes to a dead stop in Act Three, when Antrobus and his recalcitrant son Henry clash in what will become a classic father-son conflict in American drama. Here the dialogue has virtually no interruptions, ellipses, or unfinished sentences. The clash between father and son is classic Freudian psychology, where identification with the father arises as the son's Oedipal complex, Freud reminds us, "takes on a hostile coloring and becomes identical with the wish to replace his father in regard to his mother."<sup>544</sup> When Henry says, "I'm not going to be a part of any peacetime of yours. I'm going a long way from here and make my own world that's fit for a man to live in. Where a man can be free, and have a chance, and do what he wants to do in his own way" (235), we are in the unequivocal world of Clifford Odets and even more Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller's father-son relationships. Antrobus marks a clarity and transparency when he ends the play with, "We've come a long ways. We've learned. We're learning. And the steps of our journey are marked for us here" (245). Wilder, in much the same way as Clifford Odets, has opened a passageway to a conception of modern drama in which the classical conflicts of the family will find their strongest voices in American drama to come.

# Part V

## Avant Garde

*The flâneur plays the role of scout in the marketplace*

– Walter Benjamin<sup>545</sup>

*Masterpieces are good for the past: they are not good for us.*

– Antonin Artaud<sup>546</sup>

In a deleted passage from Franz Kafka's *The Trial* – an author who has, more than any other, come to symbolize the wrenching sense of alienation experienced by encroaching modernization – there is a revealing description of awakening:

As someone said to me – I can't remember who it was – it is really remarkable that when you wake up in the morning you nearly always find everything in exactly the same place as the evening before. For when asleep and dreaming you are, apparently at least, in an essentially different state from that of wakefulness, and therefore, as that man truly said, it requires enormous presence of mind or rather quickness of wit, when opening your eyes to seize hold as it were of everything in the room at exactly the same place where you had let it go on the previous evening. That was why, he said, the moment of waking up was the riskiest moment of the day. Once over without deflecting you from your orbit, you could take heart of grace for the rest of the day.<sup>547</sup>

The conundrum of the modern era can be found right here, in the narrator's absolute befuddlement. The lines drawn capture the antinomy not only between awake and asleep, but also between what sociologist Max Weber calls the belief in "legitimacy" that occurs with routine and order, and dreams that, as both Freud and Jung suggested, promote uncertainty, destabilization, and archetypes.<sup>548</sup> Dreams epitomized for many modern avant-garde artists the

antithesis of the technological world's reassuring values. As Benjamin noted in the quote above, the modern individual drifts to and from illusions and reality, strolling along the marketplace of ideas and perceptions, and acting as a "scout" between the borders of dreams and fantasies on the one side, and materialism and science on the other. The hegemony of bourgeois culture, with its idealization of norms and values, was challenged by the modernist avant garde as hardly more than jejune perceptions. Civilization, capitalism especially, depends upon the balance between commodity and the illusion that "things" bring spiritual and emotional fulfillment. For the avant garde, such emphasis not only distorted art, commercializing it to the point of eviscerating its impact, it distorted its own purpose and function.

From approximately 1890 and through the 1930s, the term "avant garde" was indelibly associated with rejection of bourgeois morality and a self-conscious exploration of new dramatic forms. It surfaces with the utopian socialists of the nineteenth century, whose main notion, writes Paul Ricoeur, "is the idea of humanity as a formative ideal."<sup>549</sup> Its twentieth-century iteration, while still political, was also interested in aesthetics, creating new forms of expression. The Aristotelian model could no longer contain the ideas expressed in modernism; since the content had changed, the form had to as well. But how this change would manifest became a subject of debate. Ultimately the historical avant garde, Günter Berghaus contends, "was never a homogeneous phenomenon, but encompassed a wide range of artists who were opposed to the aesthetic and social conventions of their day." No matter how they differed, "the 'cutting-edge' of Modernism produced genuinely novel and original works of art."<sup>550</sup>

Two overarching strands of the modernist avant garde are a radical anti-establishment modernism, which inspired a fringe but meaningful excitement amongst artists, and an irrational modernism, which surfaced in some cases as a reactionary movement. The former was tied to the revolutionary advances of non-linear form (Cubism and dissonant music, for instance); the latter fostered a growing destabilization and a rejection of scientific rationalism. Both were deeply ambivalent about art's affirmative powers, emphasizing instead art's ability to tell the truth about society's shortcomings. Following the trajectory of the avant garde this section will illustrate the intent of several dramatists whose claims to *épiter le bourgeoisie* remain unassailable and whose influence retains their vivacity. For the playwrights examined here, sex, robots, farce, and satire were tools in the hands of skilled members of the bohemian under-world. Drama for them was a means to an end and not an end in itself; their avant-gardism mixed with their politics, and their satire of the bourgeoisie was unrelenting.

# Chapter 14

## Eros and Thanatos

Friedrich Wilhelm (Frank) Wedekind (1864–1918) and Arthur Schnitzler (1862–1931) were radical German and Austrian playwrights who shared a disdain for bourgeois morality, especially its pretense, puffery, and hypocrisy. Both met stubborn resistance to their work through censorship and in Wedekind's case experienced incarceration for *lèse-majesté*. For the Jewish-born Schnitzler in particular, the virulent rise of Viennese anti-Semitism during the 1890s was an ominous sign of things to come. The breakdown of rational discourse in Austria and Germany was fertile ground for a young Viennese artist, Adolph Hitler, to develop his social theories. It was in this climate of reactionary modernism, rigid Victorian mores, and radical art movements that Wedekind and Schnitzler penned their dramas.

Schnitzler, laryngologist, son of a doctor, and highly educated, was influenced by Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, and had a cordial though often strained relationship with the Viennese psychiatrist. Like Freud, Schnitzler was affected by the excitement and fears of the times, reflected in the disorientation of stable values and inspired by new modes of artistic expression. There was, among artists, a search for a new language to express the volatile era. Viennese modernism was especially vibrant: not only Freud's discovery of the sexual subconscious lurking beneath every motive, but also Otto Wagner and Adolf Loos's romantically playful architecture, Arnold Schoenberg's stimulating anti-waltz, atonal music, and Gustav Klimt's erotic women surrounded by Byzantium mosaic patterns added to the colorful era. The bold (indeed over-the-top) stylizations and hothouse eroticism would play an important part in Schnitzler's and Wedekind's works. Schnitzler's most popular play, *Reigen* (translated as either *Hands Around*, *Round Dance* or from Max Ophüls's 1950 film version, *La Ronde*), chronicles Viennese decadence during the *fin de siècle*. The play

was completed in 1897, privately printed in 1900, re-printed in *Wiener Verlag* in 1903, and first performed in 1920. During the course of its history scandal-ridden productions were often closed by anti-Semitic attacks (in Vienna, hecklers disrupted performances with stink bombs). The play comprises ten scenes, each a two-character sexual assignation, with the couples making a complete circle: scene one contains the Prostitute and scene ten does as well, creating a pattern of dalliance that was highly original for its time. It exposed the disingenuous morality in virtually every scene, as characters deceive, feign moral superiority, and profess unequivocal love, only to do the same in the next scene of extramarital sexual intercourse. Implied, though never stated, is the underlying transmission of venereal infection. As a doctor Schnitzler was well aware of the rising epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases, and also observed the overt and covert ways it was shunned from public discourse. The sexual mating game can be perceived as a medieval dance of death, where the repeated ritualistic wooing, co-mingling, and departure make sexuality, as Gail Finney's anti-Freudian analysis claims, "the great leveler."<sup>551</sup>

Not only is the play sexually explicit, with blackout sections intermittent within the scenes (except for the last) to connote intercourse, the dialogue references sexual behavior as well. Enriched by comic timing and psychological wit, J. M. Q. Davies calls the play a "sexual daisy-chain or chain-gang through a wide range of society,"<sup>552</sup> with Schnitzler providing class distinctions in the dialogue and behavior amidst the sexual peccadilloes. No part of Viennese society goes un-lampooned and no character is above reproach. Each is lured into their infidelities by their carnality, and each moves to the next partner with blithe disregard for any emotional attachments or potentially fatal consequences. The characters may extol the virtues of love, but their romantic overtures are shallow and transparent. According to W. E. Yates, "we see enacted a stripping-away of the veneer of conventional respectability, a graphic illustration of the discrepancy between social convention and the reality of psychological motivation," with the sordid and comic enactments "symptomatic of the general disintegration of values typical of all the period: the emotional emptiness of his figures as they search vainly for companionship is part of the precarious isolation of the individual which is characteristic of a whole generation."<sup>553</sup> Upper class masters, counts, and their wives are ridiculed, but Schnitzler also brings into focus the pretenses of a Poet and an Actress, each seeking sexual exploitation for professional advancement.

Like Schnitzler, Wedekind was the son of a doctor in an established middle-class society, who also defied middle-class expectations. His *Frühlings Erwachen* (*Spring Awakening*, 1891) deals with sexual promiscuity among three youths: Melchior, Moritz, and Wendla. Because of censorship, *Spring Awakening* took over a decade to premiere in 1906, at which point the director Max Reinhardt's production caused riotous opprobrium. Sexuality blossoms



for each young character, only to have it repressed and punished by their elders. A group of provincial-teenage German students first discover their sexuality, but through a series of mishaps Wendla dies during an abortion, Moritz commits suicide after failing his exams, and though Melchior survives, he suffers grief and shame. Wedekind illustrates the rising temperature of sexual desires right from the start, with Wendla questioning in scene one why her mother dresses her in heavy clothes during summer. The next follows with this exchange between Melchior and Moritz about masturbation:

MORITZ: Have you already felt it?  
 MELCHIOR: What?  
 MORITZ: How you said.  
 MELCHIOR: The masculine itch?  
 MORITZ: Hn-hm.  
 MELCHIOR: And how!  
 MORITZ: Me too.  
 MELCHIOR: I've been able to for a long time. It's almost a year now.  
 MORITZ: It's like being struck by lightning.<sup>554</sup>

Homosexuality, sadomasochism, and rape are also part of the play, subjects that now seem passé but at the time were provocative. Without guidance, the adolescents learn sex gropingly, innocently, and violently, as in this uncomfortable scene between Melchior and Wendla:

WENDLA: Don't kiss me, Melchior! Don't kiss me!  
 MELCHIOR: Your heart – listen to it beating –  
 WENDLA: You love each other – when you kiss – No, no!  
 MELCHIOR: O, believe me, there's no such thing as love! It's all self, all ego.  
 I don't love you anymore than you love me.  
 WENDLA: Don't! Don't, Melchior!  
 MELCHIOR: Wendla!  
 WENDLA: O, Melchior. Don't, don't (40).

For Wedekind, sexual freedom is a kind of utopia, a liberation of the body from middle-class restrictions. His view on this altered, however. According to Walter Sokel, Wedekind demonstrates his conviction in *Spring Awakening* that “life could be good if restrictions on eros were removed,” an opinion he later revised, as he shows in the next plays “the conviction that tragedy resides in unappeasable and cruel nature of Eros itself, which blots out all hope for a harmonious existence.”<sup>555</sup> This is certainly true in his *Lulu Plays*, but Wedekind retains a cynicism even in *Spring Awakening*. As demonstrated in Melchior's rape of Wendla quoted above, the children have learned cruelty from their parents and teachers right from the start. For instance, the school's Headmaster

Sunstroke's lecture to the faculty (Wedekind's nomenclature "Sunstroke" is meant to be satiric) represents hypocrisy made ludicrous, as Sunstroke proselytizes against the "epidemic of suicides" (51) in his school while demanding that the other teachers suffer with the windows closed amidst the stifling heat.

The caricatures of the faculty are starkly juxtaposed against the three-dimensionality of the young. Though Wedekind sympathizes with the young, he does not absolve them of wrongdoing. The play is meant to indict sexual hypocrisy of the elders, while the flowering of adolescent sexuality comes with anguish. Moritz, for instance, is a kind of sexual androgyny, both a passive observer of sexuality and a brutalizing aggressor. He wants women to submit to his demands, yet punishes himself out of shame and guilt, a grim combination of masculine sadism and feminine masochism.<sup>556</sup> Wedekind also loosened his ties to realism with comedic satire in the spirit of Alfred Jarry's *King Ubu*, as well as investing in the bizarre and macabre. This can be observed at the end of the play, marked by the appearance in the graveyard of the suicidal Moritz entering "with his head under his arm" (76) as well as the Masked Man (played originally by Wedekind himself) as the moral voice; Wedekind was seeking to denude the play of any romantic ending. The characters enter a "world of hurt," with maturity bringing only more disappointment. Yet the play, despite its grim conclusion, is also meant to be comedic; eros is rendered absurd, a force of nature that can neither be controlled emotionally nor suppressed socially. Throughout the play Wedekind amplifies his irreverence for school, society, and the popular "boulevard" realistic dramas pervasive in Europe. Peter Skrine observes that in the context of his other work, *Spring Awakening* is "the 'adolescent' prelude to a lifelong exploration and dramatization of the forces and impulses which shape the lives of human beings and dictate their interactions and relations with each other."<sup>557</sup>

Wedekind's epic drama, held together under the rubric *The Lulu Plays*, consists of *Earth Spirit* (*Erdegeist*, 1895, a title derived from Goethe's *Faust*) and *Pandora's Box* (*Die Büchse der Pandora*, 1902).<sup>558</sup> Wedekind had hoped to create a play stretching over several evenings, what he called his "gigantic tragedy," but the nature of the play's sexual provocation and its unwieldy length forced him to condense the two plays into one. *The Lulu Plays* underwent several incarnations. Nevertheless, the underlying theme remained: the epic rise and fall of the central character Lulu from poverty, to pseudo-respectable wife of a doctor, to a prostitute in a London garret. A surfeit of male testosterone in the play illustrates the exploitation of Lulu, as each male character turns her into personal fantasies. Lulu, born a street urchin with little known past (her suitors call her Nellie, Eva, Mignon, as well as Lulu, testifying to her Protean appearance), lives unencumbered by bourgeois morality. Her transient upbringing grants her a certain freedom which the other characters lack, and this sexual liberation entices. Her transcendence of social constrictions makes

her a “free spirit,” moving from one affair to another without guilt or moral conflicts. This freedom makes her not only desirable, but also evokes a desire to tame and corral her. At the opening she has been taken from the streets by Dr. Schön. He has deemed her his mistress, but not his wife; a wife, for him, must be reserved for superior upbringing. Lulu instead marries Dr. Goll (or is forced to by Schön), a wealthy and impotent physician. Goll commissions Schwarz, the artist, to paint a portrait of Lulu. Under Goll’s thumb, Schwarz’s art is suffocated, dictated by the art patron Goll’s demands.

The opening of *Earth Spirit* presents Schwarz as marketing his artistic abilities and the final scene of *Pandora’s Box* shows Lulu selling her sexuality. This bookending, writes Peter Jelavich, is a cycle that “begins with commercialization of art and ends with the commercialization of sex; the denigration of the spirit and the body through the market becomes the overarching theme.” In between, Jelavich adds, Wedekind shows “the inability of art to be subjectively expressive in any non-distorting fashion.”<sup>559</sup> The play also expresses the inability of art controlled by men, and particularly men in commerce, to define and portray a woman. They may reflect the outer shell, but never comprehend her inner experience. Notwithstanding Goethe’s Gretchen in *Faust*, Lulu is one of the most controversial and fascinating female figures in German drama prior to Brecht, having been described as a woman who spins a web of death, a primitive force of nature, and Wedekind’s primordial-mythic creation inscrutable to those who lust after her. Specifically, Lulu is, in the words of Sol Gittleman, “Wedekind’s single most imposing symbol of his fight against civilization,” representing “someone totally alien to everyday world of reality.”<sup>560</sup> In *Earth Spirit* a strongman carries her onstage to declare:

She was created for every abuse,  
To allure and to poison and seduce,  
To murder without leaving any trace.  
Sweet creature, now keep in your proper place,  
Not foolish not affected nor eccentric,  
Even when you fail to please the critic.<sup>561</sup>

Present throughout the play is an artist’s portrait of Lulu, a sustaining symbol of what she was before her downfall. Lulu’s objectification by men is made evident by their worship of her. As each male calls her by a diminutive and condescending “pet” name, she becomes actress and mistress, passed from one hand to another, providing titillation for the doctor, muse for the painter, or victim for Jack the Ripper. Lulu is fetishized, commodified, and made available as an objectified being for the delectation of men. But who is Lulu? Without a core identity, she is a sieve, penumbra, enigma, and repository for commodification. This ambiguity is made evident from the start, as the painter Schwarz

says at the opening, "I've never painted anyone whose facial expression changed more often – I was hardly able to fix a single feature" (13). She acts out and performs fantasies for the men, but she herself is denied self-definition. When Schwarz tries to pin her down forcefully, even violently, her circumlocution eludes fixity.

- SCHWARZ: (*Sitting down on the ottoman again*). Can you speak the truth?  
 LULU: I don't know.  
 SCHWARZ: Do you believe in the creator?  
 LULU: I don't know.  
 SCHWARZ: Is there anything you can swear by?  
 LULU: I don't know. Leave me alone. You're mad.  
 SCHWARZ: What do you believe in, then?  
 LULU: I don't know.  
 SCHWARZ: Have you no soul, then?  
 LULU: I don't know.  
 SCHWARZ: Have you ever been in love?  
 LULU: I don't know ... (35–6)

Lulu embodies disjointed dreams, audacities, unsystematic responses, and all manner of evasiveness. Her toxicity infects the men around her: in *Earth Spirit*, her first husband has a stroke; the second cuts his throat; and the third she kills after he finds her flirting with his son. She reappears in *Pandora's Box* after escaping prison, but her power is declining. She murders a blackmailer, escapes to London, becomes destitute, and is finally slashed by her client, Jack the Ripper. Despite her centrality, she is present and absent, made whole and identifiable by what she enacts but lacks self-assertion. In *Earth Spirit* she says, "I don't care in the least what people think of me. I don't want to be better than I am. It suits me" (78). She defends herself to Schön, admonishing his timidity and snobbery:

If you only knew how happy your anger makes me! How proud I am that you will do anything to humiliate me! You degrade me as deep as a man can degrade a woman, in the hope that then you'll find it easier to ignore me. But you hurt yourself unspeakably by what you just said to me, I can see it in your face. You're almost at the end of your self-control. Go! For your sweet innocent fiancée's sake, leave me alone! In another minute your mood will change and you'll make another scene, one that you won't find it easy to justify the moment! (80).

She calls herself "a freak" (91), wields a gun at her suitors, carries on affairs just before her marriage, provokes men to suicide, and understands herself as an object on the market: "If men have done away with themselves for my sake, that doesn't reduce my value" (101). Gerald Izenberg makes the point that "as

the changing names she is assigned by the men in her life serve to show, she is nothing but a screen for their projections.” But as the men construct and deconstruct her identity made in their imagined sexual fantasies, Izenberg contends that Lulu’s “reality is understandably kaleidoscopic and contradictory,” because of “the psycho-logic of the female character produced by the condition in which she is placed.”<sup>562</sup> The condition she is placed in – a male-dominated world – creates ineffability. Lulu is manipulative, seductive, deceptive, narcissistic, and a calculating femme fatale because her secondary citizenship requires a transitory pose if she is to become anything other than a cipher. She must “perform” her role as sexual object and try to sustain the attention of multiple men as the only means available to her for advancement. The portrait of her that travels throughout the play is meant to juxtapose the contrasts between the fixity of her identity in the painting and the ever-changing nature of her role-playing. Her core features are suppressed while her performativity – the mask she dons for men – is highlighted. As Judith Butler reminds us, “The normative force of performativity – its power to establish what qualifies as ‘being’ – works not only through reiteration, but through exclusion as well.” The “promise” of Lulu’s identity is nullified, and as a result, “within psychoanalytic terms, the impossibility of an identity category to fulfill that promise is a consequence of a set of exclusions which found the very subjects whose identities such categories are supposed to phenomenalize and represent.”<sup>563</sup> Any attempt to describe Lulu with psychoanalytic tools will fall short because the supposed “core” features remain enigmatic out of necessity; she is a complex construction of modernist fragments obtained from boulevard farce, cabaret, and melodrama – the entities and detritus of male fantasy. Her struggle personifies women who, like Hedda Gabler, are made “whole and complete” only by male fetish. Lulu is an actress in more than profession; her identity is chameleon, talking shape only to satisfy the lusts of men, and her only outlet is mystery. Her defiant act is to deny certainty, to make herself inscrutable, which, ironically, only adds to the men’s need for containment: the more she resists, the tighter the noose. Her tragedy is that she cannot win the game she constructs; eventually her mystery is only sustainable until exhaustion overtakes her. She falls into prostitution as an inevitability and is murdered by the ultimate male sadistic abuser, Jack the Ripper.

Like the Surrealists, Wedekind not only set out to challenge the bourgeois material world, but, in the words of Anna Balakian, the artist seeks “to revitalize matter, to resituate the object in relation to themselves so that they would no longer be absorbed in their own subjectivity.” For surrealists, “instead of abstracting the object, instead of emptying it of its physical attributes, they decided to add to its qualities through the ability to *see*. A strange identification took place between the see-er and the seer.”<sup>564</sup> Wedekind, like surrealism, adds and simultaneously subtracts to and from Lulu’s identity, canceling out each attempt



Max Ernst, *Approaching Puberty*, 1921

to “know” her by placing her in one alternating situation after another, designed to create a cumulative effect. Lulu, in many respects, bears the same objectification and mystery associated with Max Ernst’s *Approaching Puberty* (1921).

The de-humanization and eroticism examined in Wedekind’s plays and the painting by Ernst are explored as metaphors for the coterminous relationship between aesthetics and the marketplace. As the youths of *Spring Awakening* are exposed to their sexuality, they are simultaneously introduced to brutality as well; and as Lulu’s sexuality becomes the source of her demise, the juxtaposition between violence and sex is accentuated. Theodor Adorno compares surrealism with pornography, where “Breasts that have been cut off, mannequins’ legs in silk stockings in the collages – these are the mementos of the objects of the partial drives that once aroused the libido.”<sup>565</sup> The dismemberment, like Lulu’s death at the hands of Jack the Ripper, suggests Wedekind’s surrealistic collage – characters ripped from the sensational

journalism of his times are symbolically attached to the depiction of Lulu, and likewise in Ernst's surrealist drawing, the material body is torn apart in an eidetic image of pornographic horror and fascination. Wedekind experimented with melodrama, epic structuring, and littering the end of the play with corpses in the style of a Jacobean *grand guignol*. His adventurism with dramatic form inspired Brecht, who would refine epic themes. For Schnitzler and Wedekind, the lure of sexuality is inextricably connected with carnality and commodity.

# Chapter 15

## Robots and Automaton

In 1896 and again in 1903, the industrial scientist Frederick W. Taylor presented papers on manufacturing, impacting the way business re-conceptualized the work place by breaking down the activities into divisions of labor. Using mathematics, he developed a scheme in which industrial tasks could be logically structured through the formal utility of time and motion: each unit of work was a separate component, creating the modern notion of mass consumption and playing a role in the formation of modern industrialization. His ideas increased productivity and concomitantly the amount of time available for consumption, eventuating in Henry Ford's assembly line manufacturing. Ford applied "Taylorism" in the first auto assembly plant. While Taylor and Ford shared the theme of mass assembly, there were, according to John Allen, two differences: "whereas Taylor sought to organize labor around machinery, Ford sought to eliminate labor by machinery"; and while both were concerned with the pace of the work, for Taylor, work was "set by the workers themselves or the supervisors, whereas for Ford it was set by the machinery, the speed of the assembly line."<sup>566</sup> Taylor was interested in the workers' well-being; Ford sought the reduction of workers. The human-machine bond was additionally illuminated by the end of the First World War, where artists and intellectuals had observed the devastating effects of industrial efficiency on the battlefield. The unprecedented carnage of World War I (ironically to be outdone in World War II) cast a negative light on industrialization. What was at first thought to be a boon to humanity became a pact with the devil.

The assembly line and its critics serve as backdrop to two anti-establishment dramatists, the Czech Karel Čapek (1890–1938) and the American Elmer Rice (1892–1967). Čapek's play, *R. U. R.* (1921), which stands for *Rossum's Universal Robots* or *Reason's Universal Robots*, examines the tyranny of the



mechanical world. Robots overtake humans because, as the opening stage directions note, the general office has plastered signs saying “Buy yourself a Robot! Reason’s Robots – The Cheapest Workers Around!”<sup>567</sup> Humans are inefficient; robots are cheaper and need less maintenance. The term “robot,” derived from the Czech term *robota*, meaning “drudgery,” was created by Čapek and his brother Josef (they collaborated on several projects) as a metaphor for automation. As the robots in the play gain traction, they seek human attributes. Reacting to a debate in London (in which Shaw and the playwright G. K. Chesterton participated), Čapek wrote: “I wanted to write a comedy, partly of science, partly of truth. The old inventor, Mr. Rossum (whose name means Mr. Intellect or Mr. Brain), is no more or less than a typical representative of the scientific materialism of the last century.” Rossum’s intent is “to prove God unnecessary and meaningless,” with robots “the road to industrial production.” Following the principles of mass production, Čapek says, “We are in the grip of industrialism; this terrible machinery must not stop, for if it does it would destroy the lives of thousands. It must, on the contrary, go on faster and faster, even though in the process it destroys thousands and thousands of other lives.”<sup>568</sup>

Almost at the same time as Čapek’s play gained popularity, Elmer Rice wrote *The Adding Machine* (1923). The central character is “Zero,” who is, according to Deanna Toten Beard, Rice’s “modern American Everyman.”<sup>569</sup> A “poor working drudge,” writes Julia Walker,<sup>570</sup> he is a by-product of the efficient machine, a man who fulfills his routine of “adding” and a man-machine who channels his energy inwardly. Zero is what Oliver Zunz calls the “middle-level managerial stratum,” a product of the spread of corporate bureaucrats. Though the American model of corporate bureaucracies departed from the general European model of governmental strata (examined by Weber), the American “middle-level corporate managers did follow the Weberian bureaucratic model in that these men became specialized, adhered to formalized work rules, and advanced in a differential hierarchy.”<sup>571</sup> Unable to express his desire for his co-worker, Daisy, or confront his Boss, Zero’s pent-up frustration is unleashed at the moment he is fired. The end of Act One culminates in his termination, where the Boss says he has “no other alternative – greatly regret – old employee – efficiency – economy – *business* – *business* – BUSINESS –,” at which point Zero and the Boss face each other in silence, the Boss gesticulating but soundless.<sup>572</sup>

*The Adding Machine*, Rice said, is “the case history of one of the slave souls who are both the raw material and the product of a mechanized society.”<sup>573</sup> Mr. Zero murders his Boss, is sentenced to execution, enters the afterlife, yet finds that even there life is unsatisfying. Though he finds Daisy in Elysian Fields, a pseudo-heavenly place, because Daisy has committed suicide, Zero is habitually drawn back to his routines – operating an adding machine. In the end he is called back to earth by Lieutenant Charles, who orders Zero to leave the mythic adding

machines he has come to know. Charles condescendingly tells Zero that “If there ever was a soul in the world that was labeled slave it’s yours. Why, all the bosses and kings that there ever were have left their trademark on your backside” (132). Amidst the grim depictions of humans crushed by machines, Čapek and Rice find dim hope in human possibility. The scenes led by a series of sensory impressions occurring towards the ends of their plays – images of hands and souls for Čapek, and touching, kissing, and dancing by Rice – demonstrate the saving grace of human relationships. But for Rice in particular, the protagonist Zero proves to be not merely a victim of the machine age, but as Ronald Wainscott contends, “a despicable, racist, pedestrian nonentity whose lot would never change, in part because he was incapable of or unwilling to change.”<sup>574</sup> In the play, machine and humanity merge like DNA – fixed, immobile, and subject to movement only through the strings of the corporate puppet-master’s manipulations.

# Chapter 16

## Farce and Parody

The Polish Stanislaw Ignacy (“Witkacy” – his self-declared moniker) Witkiewicz (1885–1939) and the Russian Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930) were playwrights, poets, performance artists, theorists, caricaturists, lampooners, demagogues, provocateurs, confirmed outsiders, and tireless self-promoters. Both were anti-establishment figures, precocious as children, and committed suicide in the face of Nazi and Soviet oppression. They emerged during a time of heightened experimentation in Polish-Russian theatre, expressing enthusiasm for theatre’s political radicalism and provocative possibilities. The Russian directors Meyerhold and Tsiolkovsky, among others, produced plays with expressionistic staging and circus acrobatics (Meyerhold’s bio-mechanics and Tsiolkovsky Cubist stylization, for example), encouraging avant-garde dramas. Russian theatre in particular experienced a rush to modernization. In set design, constructivism took hold; and theoretically, new ideas issued from several venues. One theorist in particular, Fyodor Sologub, advocated a new version of modern drama in his 1908 essay “The Theatre of a Single Will.” Following Wagner’s idea of “total work of art,” Sologub maintained that “drama is the product of a single concept just as the universe is the product of a single creative idea.” Since “fate” is manipulated by the author, his or her will should be the driving force. “The only thing that has to be performed is the eternal mystery,” for the dramatist is in control of the time, place, and action of the scene.<sup>575</sup>

It would appear evident that even if they had not directly read his essay, Sologub’s ideas influenced Witkiewicz and Meyerhold. Their plays reflect the spirit of a “single will.” For Witkiewicz in particular, his theory of “Pure Form” combined Sologub’s idea of subjectivism with an emphasis on dream-states, potpourris of styles, and non-Euclidian fantasy. “What the world of objects and

representations is to painting,” he wrote in 1921, “so the world of emotions is to music, and conceptual meaning is to poetry and the sense of action is to theatre.”<sup>576</sup> Action for him didn’t imply linearity, but rather whirligig motion and disorienting events. Witkiewicz was a colleague of the stage director Jacques Copeau, whose dramas evoked dreams and fantasies rather than photo-realism, which Copeau considered as little more than a sidebar to journalism. Though Witkiewicz was not opposed to realism *per se* – his plays reflect real relationships, human experiences, and a heavy dollop of eroticism – he added farce and parody to the mix. Parody, especially, was important to him: he, like Meyerhold, wanted to mock institutions for stifling impulses and interfering with his concept of pure forms. “Theatre, like poetry, is a composite art,” he contends, “but it is made up of even more elements not intrinsic to it.” It is therefore the obligation of the playwright “to create a theatrical idiom capable of expressing metaphysical feelings within purely formal dimensions.”<sup>577</sup> His ideal theatre challenges the facile melodrama by admitting other arts, but also emphasizing theatre containing its own “purity.” According to Daniel Gerould, Witkiewicz’s “*Pure Form* is a radical theory of non-realistic drama, according to which the performers and their words, gestures, and actions should serve as sounds, colors and shapes in a total composition rather than as a depiction of the outside ‘real’ world.” Witkiewicz “wished to free drama from conventional psychology and storytelling and give it formal possibilities of modern art and music.”<sup>578</sup>

Witkiewicz’s dramas mix parody and the fabulistic. The frolicsome tone and mock-seriousness in *The Madman and the Nun* (*Wariat i zakonnica*, 1923) plows relentlessly forward into parody, personified by its subtitle “There Is Nothing Bad Which Could Not Turn into Something Worse” and dedicated “to all the madmen of the world.” The mad poet Walpurg, whose name derives from “Walpurgis Night” in Goethe’s *Faust*, is confined to a “cell for raving maniacs in the lunatic asylum, At the Sign of the Jugged Hare.”<sup>579</sup> Walpurg is imprisoned in a madhouse where the “doctors” attempt to “cure” his non-conformity, using a Nun as sexual enticement. Walpurg turns the tables and seduces the Nun by expressing his passions – “My soul’s fire has burned away my earthly shell,” while his problem lies in the fact that his “nerves weren’t strong enough to resist that damnable something or other which compelled me to write” (16). Walpurg is Witkiewicz’s spokesperson and alter ego – Sologub’s “single will” – condemning the automation of society. Walpurg feigns suicide, only to reappear as a clean shaven hero whisking away the Nun from the institutes of corrupt religion and psychiatry.

The representation of chaotic and contradictory consciousness in Witkiewicz’s plays, Christine Kiebuszinska posits, “reflected an attitude that addressed issues of relativity, instability, violence, and dehumanization in face of both war and revolution.”<sup>580</sup> His plays often contain eroticism, specifically male heterosexual cravings: in *The Cuttlefish* (1922), for instance, the play begins with a man and

a statue as lover, only to be challenged by the human lover. His work sometimes demonstrates the puerility of an over-testosteroned adolescent, a rambunctiousness that comes from sex-starved anxiety and experimental drug use rather than political or artistic sophistication; and his theory of “pure form” occasionally succumbs to *grand guignol*. But there is no mistaking his attack on the status quo. Witkiewicz often paraded the streets of Warsaw in a Harlequin costume in an effort to upset the authorities and mock the bourgeoisie, and his belief in his self-proclaimed radicalism never waned. According to Jan Kott, “Witkiewicz, like Artaud, was convinced that in societies bored by automatization, art in order to shock must be violent.” As a result, his characters “torture themselves physically and mental, indulge in gigantic orgies, and use terrifying narcotics,” but in every violent incident the events “are always ‘theatrical,’” and the “action is spectacular ‘make-believe,’ devoid of credibility.”<sup>581</sup> This was because the theatre for him was a pure form disconnected from “real life.” He became more popular after his death, attracting large audiences during the 1960s.

Mayakovsky wrote two plays, *The Bedbug* (1929) and *The Bathhouse* (1930), that caused considerable political blowback from the Soviet authorities. During his early career as a poet and playwright he was the model Communist, receiving the full support of the propaganda machine for his pro-Soviet writings. By the end of the 1920s his opinions turned, as Stalin’s five year plan (beginning in 1928) ushered in brutal repression. In *The Bedbug*, Mayakovsky creates a carnival atmosphere of Soviet life, satirizing its every facet. At a wedding banquet, for example, a tipsy owner of residential real estate, Oleg Bayan (whose name is also that of a Russian bard), holds forth on the fiancé Skripkin (real name being Prisyppkin), delaying the proceedings because he wants to get married in the presence of the secretary of the factory committee. The inebriated Bayan satirically extols the virtues of Communism:

I am happy, most happy, at this given interval of time, of the all-out fight that Comrade Skripkin has waged along the way. True enough, somewhere along the way he lost his Party card. But on the other hand, he did acquire many government lottery tickets. We have succeeded in harmonizing and coordinating the class contradictions and other conflicts between bride and groom. And he who is armed with the Marxist view cannot fail to see in this fact, as in the drop of water, so to speak, the future happiness of mankind – that which the common people call socialism.<sup>582</sup>

Like Witkiewicz, Mayakovsky turns to farce, making the groom, Prisyppkin, a participant in a drunken brawl that inadvertently starts a fire. All die except Prisyppkin, who falls into water and is frozen for fifty years. Revived in the final scenes, he is, like Witkiewicz’s Madman, the subject of professors and scientists

who experiment on him. Mayakovsky parodies the strict adherence of Marxist dogma. When unfrozen, Prisyppkin is hospitalized, desperate for a drink. The Professor tells him that "Society hopes to bring him up to the human level," but Prisyppkin retorts: "To hell with society, and to hell with you, too! I never asked you to resurrect me. Freeze me back where I was!" (185).

If Witkiewicz and Mayakovsky use farce to critique the status quo, the work of the Swiss playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt (1921–1990) and the Russian-Yiddish author Shloyme Zanol Rappoport, *nom de plume* S. An-sky (1863–1920) oscillate from the sublime to the ridiculous. Both authors were intellectuals attending to the division between the old world and the new, where characters straddle the divide and maneuver across its perimeters. An-sky's most well-known play, *The Dybbuk* (1914), is subtitled "Between Two Worlds" (*Der dibek oder tsvishn tsvey veltn*). Originally written in Russian, translated by the author into Yiddish and presented to the Moscow Art Theatre in 1920, the play examines the *dybbuk* phenomenon. The dybbuk, a product of Chasidic folklore, is "an agent of dissolution," confounding "the boundaries of the self," in which, according to Gabriella Safran and Stephen Zipperstein, the "living and dead interact in ways incomprehensible to modern societies."<sup>583</sup> For An-sky, the play concerns the threnody of death and resurrection, religious sanctity and blasphemy, and the sacred and the profane. At root is a love story between Leah, the daughter of the wealthy Sender, and the impoverished Channon. Though they were destined to join in matrimony by a pact made by Sender and Channon's father when they were both poor and struggling youths, Sender gained wealth and abandoned his promise. When Channon drifts into Sender's home as a visiting Talmudic student, Sender (who does not recognize Channon as his friend's son) ignores his vow and simply dismisses the poor Channon as an unacceptable groom. Sender epitomizes the modern materialist, using wealth to purchase holiness and heaven. The poor are invited to the matrimonial ceremony, only to feast on the crumbs. Channon, who dies from a broken heart, returns as a dybbuk invading Leah's body. No amount of Rabbinical exorcism can extricate his soul from her, as Sender's crimes of inhumanity are, for An-sky, intolerable.

The play's setting features Jewish spirituality, especially the Kabala, the book of mysticism, which stands as an antithesis to the Talmud, the consecrated book of laws. The spiritual sphere in *The Dybbuk* is Chassidism, the Eastern European sect of Jewish spiritualism. The origination of Chassidism is bound up with Yiddish culture and language; the Diaspora left a people bereft of a homeland, resulting in an accentuation of methods and rituals that sought to make Jewish culture unique. Kosher versus *trayf* (non-kosher), Jew versus non-Jew, modernism versus spiritualism were some of the factors leading to a European Yiddish-keit ("Yiddishness") as a way of defining Judaism. During the middle ages Chassidic Jews experienced two Messianic movements that

held the promise of Zionism. According to An-sky's friend and associate, Chaim Zhitlowsky, both movements "had broken down after arousing the most ecstatic hopes in the false Messiah's pretensions." As a result, the "religious Jew of that period was like a hypochondriac living in constant terror lest he forget to take this medicine or that at the prescribed moment."<sup>584</sup> Many turned to the Kabala for solace, disappointed in Talmudic religious authority. Ultimately the longing for direction and re-connection with Judaism drove many towards spiritualism.

The play features the struggle between spirit and law, but it also stresses the political. An-sky, a socialist with ties to the Russian Revolution, sees the betrayal of Sender as an abandonment of his communitarian commitment. In the trial of exorcism, the Rabbis need background to purge the *dybbuk*-demon from Leah's body. But what they find is that Sender violated his commitment. "But you were rich," says Rabbi Samson, "while Nissin's son [Channon] was poor, and so you turned your back on him and went seeking for your daughter a bridegroom of high estate and great possessions" (126). Sender broke the sacred covenant that binds everyone. For An-sky, Judaism is inherently communitarian and socialistic; as Emmanuel Levinas contends, and An-sky would likely agree, "Jewish man discovers man before discovering landscapes and towns. He is at home in society before being so in a house." Exiled on earth, Jews find "meaning to the earth on the basis of human society."<sup>585</sup> In the play wealth is the manna which sets in motion the spiritual world's rebellion, and nothing can restore it until human beings are deemed worthier than prosperity-seekers and Levinas's assertions of human relationships are returned.

"The universe for me is chaos," wrote Friedrich Dürrenmatt, "something monstrous, a riddle of misfortunes which must be accepted but before which one must not capitulate."<sup>586</sup> Like An-sky, his play *The Visit* (originally *Der Besuch der alten Dame*, *The Visit of the Elderly Lady*, 1956) calls into judgment greed and selfishness. A past transgression comes back to haunt the protagonist and the town. The once prosperous but now ramshackled Guellen city (whose name means "manure") awaits the arrival of the millionairess Claire Zachanassian. Ill, Claire's former suitor, is encouraged by the Mayor to inform Claire of the town's demise in the hope that she will donate to its coffers. When Claire arrives with her entourage we find her a jig-saw puzzle of artificial body parts, having endured catastrophes of plane wrecks and other mishaps. But what has been most wounded is her heart. The town pretentiously pays homage to her, without remembering that the oil-baroness Claire accumulated her wealth first as a prostitute. In order for the town to receive one million pounds, it must offer "justice" to Claire, who bore Ill's illegitimate child. When Ill bribed others to claim fatherhood, he stigmatized Claire, who left humiliated. Now elderly, she still harbors revenge and will offer to donate with this proviso: "A million for Guellen if someone kills Alfred Ill."<sup>587</sup> The town and its Mayor

are appalled, ending Act One with this rebuttal: “Madam Zachanassian: You forget, this is Europe. You forget, we are not savages. In the name of all citizens of Guellen, I reject your offer; and I reject it in the name of humanity. We would rather have poverty than blood on our hands.” After *huge applause*, Clair replies: “I’ll wait” (39).

The *coup de théâtre* that ends the act leads inevitably to wavering doubt in Act Two. Policeman, Mayor, Priest, and even Ill’s own family begin to consider alternative options. In a revealing passage in Act Three, the Schoolmaster confesses the encroaching avarice that has overtaken him, symbolizing European attraction to fascism that had occurred several decades before: “They will kill you,” the Schoolmaster warns Ill. “I’ve known it from the beginning and you’ve known it too for a long time, even if no one else in Guellen wants to admit it. The temptation is too great and our poverty is too wretched. But I know something else. I shall take part in it. I can feel myself slowly becoming a murderer. My faith in humanity is powerless to stop it. And because I know all this, I have also become a sot” (77).

The dramatists in this section shed light on modernism’s conformity, its baggage of societal cohesion and willingness to capitulate. The playwrights demonstrate the level characters will descend in order to obtain the goods of the fashionable marketplace. For every façade of civilization there lies beneath sycophants, unhesitatingly quick to rush in and snare the remains of the spirit – and no playwright understood the craven desire for survival at any cost more than the next to be examined.



Part VI

Epic Modernism



# Chapter 17

## Gaming the System

*He made suggestions/We carried them out. Such an inscription would/  
Honor us all.*

– Bertolt Brecht<sup>588</sup>

In Steven Spielberg's 1998 film *Saving Private Ryan*, the protagonist, played by the American everyman Tom Hanks, shoulders the burden of saving his brother-in-arms, Private Ryan (Matt Damon). We know from the beginning that Ryan's three brothers lost their lives. Hanks, having stormed the beachhead at Normandy, is immediately and without rest assigned to find Ryan, who has parachuted behind enemy lines. Hanks's goal is to bring him home alive. The War Department is reluctant to let Ryan's mother suffer another loss. Hanks and his unit fill the audience with a sense of hard-won redemption; their assignment is harrowing yet noble; and when they finally discover Ryan the effort to get there has been costly: lives lost, nerves frayed, Hanks's authority challenged, and the point of the mission itself called into question by the beleaguered troops. Why rescue one man at the cost of others becomes the moral conundrum. When Hanks and his comrades serendipitously run into Ryan, he and his small unit are defending a bridge where the Germans plan their counterattack. Informed of his brothers' deaths, Ryan decides to stay with his unit and defend the bridge. In typical heroic fashion, he says: "Tell my mother that these are my only brothers now. She'll understand." Even if Hanks's unit combines with Ryan's, they are hopelessly outnumbered against a massive German counterassault. In the critical scene, Hanks and his Sergeant (Tom Sizemore) consider their options: stay or leave. The scene is shot in an upward angle, casting Hanks and Sizemore in heroic light. When the decision to stay with Ryan leads to their deaths, we believe Ryan will live up to Hank's

expectations, demonstrating that their sacrifice was worthwhile. Ryan will rise to the occasion and our belief in him is assured because we'd rather have this outcome than confront institutions that, in reality, disappoint. Heroism takes on mythic and theological implications; it removes us from reality and demonstrates the potential for human beatification. Hanks is endowed with martyrdom, the quiet and unassuming Captain dutifully fulfilling his orders, and creates an unequivocal empathy for his mission. As a genre, war stories are concerned with the spectaculars of heroic death: dying is narrated as either ennobling or a necessary counterweight to the recklessness of statesmen who facilitate groundless conflicts. Either way, the emotions of war narratives confirm the myth that war *brings out the best in us*.

Had Bertolt Brecht written the story, escape would have occurred, because for Brecht *war brings out the worst in us*. War is hardly ennobling or moral; it is corrupt and rapacious, triggering selfishness and survival. For Brecht war has no "good intentions" because war's brutality turns *everyone* into greedy survivors and decidedly *un*-empathetic. Comparing Spielberg and Brecht illustrates the fundamental meaning of Brecht's modern drama – how it stands apart from conventional narratives and cuts against the grain of assumptions. In Brecht's early works as well as his four major plays – *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Life of Galileo*, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* – plots hinge on similar life-and-death decisions.<sup>589</sup> But with Brecht, entirely different outcomes are drawn, depicting cowardice rather than sacrifice, denial rather than acceptance, and rejection rather than comradeship. In each case Brecht's protagonists choose to "save their own skin" rather than fall on the sword, and the very idea of an alternative "choice" is one of Brecht's significant contributions to modern drama. As Richard Gilman contends, "it was Bertolt Brecht's greatest intellectual achievement, the fulfillment of his belief in the dramatist as a species of philosopher, to have placed the problem of choice – or rather, the fact that we have difficulty being conscious of it – at the center of his late plays."<sup>590</sup> His plays investigate choices made by protagonists under capitalism and authoritarianism that are anti-romantic and survival-oriented because in every case his protagonists "game" the establishment – maneuvering, outfoxing, and outwitting a perfidious system that offers no other rational alternative.

*The Caucasian Chalk Circle* exemplifies this "gaming": it is based on a Chinese fable and turns on the same kind of plot-test that occupies the Biblical tale of King Solomon. The Governor's Wife, an omnivorous, nouveau-riche vulgarian, inadvertently leaves her baby boy at the moment of civil unrest. The servant Grusha, the central character of the play's first half (the wily survivor Azdak commands the second), takes the child and struggles with it across a war-torn terrain. In the end, Azdak presides over the trial to determine whether Grusha or the Governor's Wife is the "authentic" mother. Azdak bases his decision on a tug-of-war: each is to grab an arm and pull. "I'll make a test,"

he says, and orders a chalk circle to be drawn on the floor. He then commands the two mothers, Grusha and the Governor's Wife, to take positions on the edges of the circle. "Now each of you take the child by a hand. The true mother is she who has the strength to pull the child out of the circle, towards herself."<sup>591</sup> Grusha "denies" motherhood (an act that will also reoccur in *Mother Courage*) because to continue to "pull" will rip the child apart. Azdak asks them to pull again, and again Grusha lets go: "I've brought him up!," she cries, "Am I to tear him to pieces? I can't do it!" (95). Azdak rewards Grusha the child and a parable is learned: justice is served not by predictable blood-ties but by counter-intuitive rationale. An anti-heroic choice to abandon the child is rewarded on the basis of survival, not sacrifice.

Bertolt (Eugene Berthold Fredrich) Brecht (1898–1956) was born into a middle class family of manufacturers. As with many German authors and artists of the first-half-of-the-twentieth-century generation, three formative experiences influenced his dramas: World War I (1914–1918), the Weimar period (1919–1933), and the Nazi reign of terror (1933–1945). At the end of World War I Brecht emerged as a medical orderly physically unscathed but psychically scarred. The bloodshed unleashed during the war exposed him to the folly of Teutonic hype: German jingoism contrasted with the desolation in the trenches and the obliterating firepower of modern weaponry. After the war he lived through the 1920s, a terrifying period in German history. In charge was the befuddled Weimar Republic attempting to lead a country reeling from the demands of war reparations, rampant inflation, and violent political upheaval. Revolutions from the left and right, attempted coups and assassinations, and street brawls between Communists and Fascists, occurred regularly. But the period's destabilization had the advantage of a government too preoccupied to censor the arts or social life. As a consequence, from 1918 till Nazi takeover in 1933, Germany experienced unprecedented social and artistic freedom, making Berlin, along with New York, Paris, and Shanghai, the most culturally advanced and exciting city in the world. It was the epicenter of modernism, where art, film, theatre, literature, fashion, design, architecture, and the visual arts not only thrived but broke new ground. The art scene in Berlin merged with underground cabarets, salons, and nightclubs; Expressionism flourished; adventurous filmmakers created innovative breakthroughs; American jazz and classical music could be heard on the same streets; and Weimar's porous strata of demimonde and intelligentsia rubbed elbows. It was a brief but thrilling period where restrictions on homosexuality were virtually nil, women made strides, and modernist ideas such as Bauhaus architecture, New Objectivity, and Dadaism arose.

All this came to an abrupt halt with Nazism. Brecht, from that point on, was an outcast on the run. For the Nazis this Marxist playwright and radical anti-war activist was their public enemy number one. In every play from 1933

onward some aspect of authoritarianism is challenged. Empathy for National Socialism became Brecht's foremost target. Amidst this backdrop is probably the single most important modern dramatist; I say "probably," because Brecht was also suspect. He wrote dozens of plays, musicals, poems, and theoretical treatises – not all of them original. Some of his works are open to allegations of plagiarism.<sup>592</sup> His plays are dynamic and gripping satires of war and totalitarianism; he symbolized a powerfully defiant iconoclasm in the face of Nazi brutality; and he was a stalwart opponent of authoritarianism. But he was also duplicitous in his individual dealings and an opportunist, and many of his characters exhibit the same traits. He exploited his wives and lovers – Ruth Berlau, Margarete Steffin, Elisabeth Hauptmann, and Helene Weigel – using them as translators, adaptors of plays, and personal advocates. Even amongst fellow Marxists he was deemed arrogant and disdainful; Eric Bentley wrote that many "leading critics and academics of East Germany" had "no trouble at all explaining What is Wrong With Brecht from 'the Marxist viewpoint.' 'For one thing,' said one of them, a rival Communist playwright, 'he thinks no one but him understands Marx.'" <sup>593</sup> Still, he is situated historically at the midpoint of modern drama, and his enormous influence is unassailable.

### Early Work

Brecht's early plays and poems were concerned with an existential-nihilistic view of the world. He was influenced by Rimbaud's poetry and his characters are infused with criminals and bohemians, expressing sensuality, bisexuality, nature, and art. Expressionism was in vogue, and its influence on Brecht, though peripherally, can be observed in his plays' free-wheeling style. All of Brecht's plays before his first commercial success, *The Threepenny Opera* in 1929, investigate morbid decay in human relations and an iconoclast's mistrust for authority. His first play, *Baal* (1919), is an episodic journey of a disreputable but charismatic bohemian who has sexual intercourse with women of various economic stations, murders his male lover in a jealous fit, and is known to write poetry. Written as a *semi-roman à clef*, it documents Brecht's early life as a renegade street-singer in the style of Frank Wedekind (whom Brecht knew and admired). But Brecht, at an early age, shifts into what Hanns Otto Münsterer calls an "unadulterated enthusiasm towards a growing awareness of the pain and suffering involved in war, and thence to a criticism and even outright condemnation of the conflict."<sup>594</sup> *Drums in the Night* and *Man is Man* are fierce anti-war plays, and *In the Jungle of the Cities* is anti-authoritarian. By the end of the 1920s, under the tutelage of Karl Korsch, Brecht began to take up Marxism. According to John Willett, it was the Wall Street collapse unleashing economic chaos that marked the "pivotal point for Brecht, and with

it he became not just a political writer but a deviser of new forms of committed art and an exceptionally consistent believer in the primacy of politics.”<sup>595</sup> But even in his early works we can observe his nascent political themes.

Brecht rejected characters as victims and was strongly antithetical to the idea that society must accept as unchangeable poverty and social injustice. He opposed plays that envisioned a way out of poverty for certain lucky individuals if only the right heroic person steps forward, and recoiled against those that said little or nothing about how the conditions of poverty first materialize. He saw too many plays that shared the common ground of optimism yet were devoid of the roots of injustice. Rather, he wanted drama to cast a critical view on society. He opposed, more than anything else, sentimentality; a happy ending sugarcoated by gallant virtue. Overcoming adversity by dint of charitable virtuosity and individual bravery was for Brecht a canard. For him, dramas of heroism share a blind spot: individuals cannot affect the fate of the world.

## Brecht and Theory

Though his theories were yet to take formal shape, Brecht’s early writings reveal his inclination toward the political. His second play, *Drums in the Night*, is the story of a soldier returning home from World War I, having spent time in a prison camp. His arrival home at first instigates radicals towards revolutionary activity; they are inspired by his plight and by his story of having lost the woman of his dreams. Yet at the moment the radicals are ready to fight, the hero decides against joining them. Brecht wrote the following in his diary: “the play’s strong, healthy, un-tragic ending, which it had from the outset and for the sake of which it was written, is the only possible ending; anything else is too easy a way out, a feeble concoction, a concession to Romanticism. Here is a man apparently at an emotional climax, making a complete *volte-face*; he tosses all passion aside, tells his followers and admirers to stuff it, then goes home to the woman for whose sake he created the whole moral fuss. Bed as final curtain. To hell with ideas, to hell with duty!”<sup>596</sup> This choice, based on counter-intuitiveness and upending conventional expectations, would later be known as Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* – “estrangement effect” or “making strange.”

*Verfremdungseffekt* derives in part from the Russian “Formalist” device, introduced in 1917 by the literary critic Victor Shklovsky, known as *ostranenie* – variously translated as “defamiliarization,” “alienation effect,” or “estrangement” – which spawned a modern literary movement. Literary forms eventually ossify into clichés; it was the task of *ostranenie* to expose the forms as calcified relics of the past by showing readers and audiences how habitual they have become and how routinely we accept them as “fact.” The “war brings out the best in us,” for instance, is stylistically accepted as a way of thinking – and for Brecht this

received wisdom needed a metaphysical facelift; instead of men and women preparing to die for a cause that is just or otherwise, he gives us human frailty and survival instinct. People in Brecht's plays do not chose the predictable, but rather do the opposite; in order to understand this, it is necessary for the playwright and the production to create a contradictory way of looking at things. "To alienate an event or a character," he says, is simply to take what "is obvious, known, evident and produce surprise and curiosity out of it." The results of this process, he claims, achieves "the fact that the spectator need no longer see the human beings presented on the stage as being unchangeable, unadaptable, and handed over helplessly to fate. What he sees is that this human being is thus and so because conditions are thus and so. And conditions are thus and so because human beings are thus and so."<sup>597</sup> Theatre must instigate change by showing us "context" – the multiple situations and circumstances that inform actions. His shift in emphasis is from the psychological to the sociological; it is Stanislavsky's theatre but from social, not personal, motivation. According to Stephen Eric Bronner, Brecht "detested irrationalism, prided himself on his 'realism,' conceived of his work as part of the attempt to transform the existing order, and was always concerned with keeping close ties to the Communist Party."<sup>598</sup> Brecht doesn't abandon traditional methods of realistic presentation (as many scholars would have it); his plays still tell a gripping story in linear, traditional fashion. But while he uses the theatre of illusion, he demands what Werner Hecht calls "a greater intellectual concern, a message with multiple meanings, and a greater use of mime and gesture."<sup>599</sup> He wants a modern theatre in line with modern complexity.

First and foremost, writes Martin Esslin, Brecht "was a rebel. The Brechtian theatre can be understood only in the light of what he rebelled against: the theatre as he found it in Germany around 1920 and as it still remains in many parts of the world to this day – a theatre in which bombastic productions of the classics alternate with empty photographic replicas of everyday life, whether in melodrama or drawing room comedy; a theatre that oscillates between emotional uplift and after-dinner entertainment."<sup>600</sup> Rather than the histrionics associated with expressionism, or the photo reproduction of hyper-naturalism, Brecht culled out a style he called "epic theatre." Epic theatre is a conglomeration of several sources: German agitprop theatre, the music hall-cabarets of Frank Wedekind and Karl Valentin; the staging by the German director Piscator; Asian theatre techniques (especially the actor Mei Lin-fang); silent film (the Russian director Sergei Eisenstein and the American Charlie Chaplin, in particular); Marxist dialectics; and Elizabethan dramaturgical structure (episodic rather than continuity). Epic theatre makes use of the narrator as a function to explicate the story's proceedings, and breaks up the plot's stream-of-consciousness flow. For Brecht, episodes are joined together so that a break in the action is evident; dissonant music is particularly important, inserted



throughout his plays as a means of cooling down heated emotions arising from previous scenes. He opposed Wagner's "total work of art" (one guiding hand engineering emotions) and the imposition of a leitmotif in the music to underscore a theme. Instead, music should work against the grain, exposing the manipulative-forward tug of the action. He says: "As we cannot invite the audience to fling itself into the story as if it were a river and let itself be carried vaguely hither and thither, the individual episodes have to be knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed. The episodes must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgment."<sup>601</sup> Brecht didn't want audiences to "gape" mindlessly or go into a trance in seeing events onstage; they should be appalled, moved to active engagement rather than passive acceptance. He wanted audiences to look at events with a critical eye, not in order to empathize with the protagonist (which he felt subdues active engagement), but to observe the actions and consider their motives and ramifications. Frederic Ewen explains that "Brecht viewed the theatre as an entity, not the least important element of which was constituted by the audience. He believed it necessary to develop the art of the spectator, no less than that of the writer or actor. He regarded the audience as a 'producer,' and its share in the theatre as of great importance."<sup>602</sup>

While a great deal of his theories of drama and theatricality have been either rejected as unusable or are now taken for granted in mainstream practice, his key ideas inform his plays. The objective of any play should be to transform society and to subject ideology and authority to careful scrutiny. Epic theatre, Brecht says, "must report,"<sup>603</sup> by which he means theatre must demonstrate the contradictions occurring in the world, the various sides to each argument, so that audiences can discern what decision best leads to justice, progress, and equality. In his debates with other aesthetic thinkers, he articulates this "reportage" idea when describing "realism." Realistic theatre, he says, "means discovering the causal complexes of society/unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those in power/writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up/emphasizing the element of development/making possible the concrete, and making possible abstractions from it."<sup>604</sup> Realism for Brecht was not something static but malleable, subject to changing circumstances and reflective of a constantly evolving reality. Brecht wanted to see what was underneath events, what made them the way they are, and how they can be adjusted. Oppressive regimes do not oppress in the same way every time; the point of playwriting was rewriting – exposing new methods of subjugation as they surface. Realistic theatre, he maintained, should reveal the fundamental trends and necessary connections which are often deeply hidden beneath deceptive appearances, but which are vitally important for a real comprehension of human motivations and actions in various historical circumstances.

Brecht was dissatisfied with naturalism and the avant garde. Naturalism merely reproduces facsimiles of reality and takes for granted human actions; it fails to uncover the contradictions underneath events. The avant garde undermines social change by dehumanizing people into abstract forms. The avant garde defeats itself by accepting the false alternative of abstraction as the only possible expression. Brecht agreed for the most part with the avant garde's efforts to break the hold of conventionalized, nineteenth-century modes of perception; he likewise wanted to shake audiences out of their stupor in order to make them conscious of an increasingly complex world. He challenges audiences to rethink their perceptions and disturb their complacency by demonstrating that reality is not reality as perceived and structured by bourgeois consciousness; underneath lies a realm of dynamic interrelations and patterns alien to liberal bourgeois humanism or the classical concept of order. But rather than make the events mysterious and opaque as the avant-gardists would have it, Brecht wanted greater transparency. According to Nicholas Abercrombie, Scott Lash, and Brian Longhurst, Brecht's goal "is to make the nature of the world clear, to reach a deeper truth and 'expose' reality," but not by presenting "a view of everyday life or a world that is plausible in everyday terms." Rather, "the author's hand and the production process are revealed, encouraging speculation on the construction of the drama."<sup>605</sup> Brecht often chose historical situations and used the events as a way to organize the material compellingly. Historical insights for Brecht, writes Astrid Oesmann, "depends on what Brecht calls *zusammenfassen* (to gather together; to summarize), the recognition that coherent narratives can only be created when imposed upon a chaos of historical reality." What Brecht was after, Oesmann says, "is a reorganization of the production and perception of history, and he seeks to replace the traditional narratives of character and events with a theatrical presentation that focuses on inconsistencies and contradictions."<sup>606</sup>

For Brecht, theatre is the locale for pleasure and didacticism, entertainment and discovery; learning for Brecht is not antithetical to enjoyment. Too often his plays are presented as sterile, bloodless lessons; this was never his intent. He wanted very much to entertain, amuse, and create vivid theatrical productions. Brecht opposed empathy, creating a situation where the audience identifies with the protagonist; but this did not mean he opposed any connection to individuals. He took aim at empathy because he felt empathy was ill-equipped to foster social and political insights. We ought to keep in mind that empathy was a key tool used by Hitler and, in large measure, developed along the lines of Richard Wagner's "total work of art" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*). Hitler used emotional connections as a way of intoning a bond with his audiences; he was the consummate rabble-rouser, depicting himself as the victim of oppression when in fact it was the other way around. This is Brecht's Platonic point: we are deceived by empathy and emotionalism because, in the hands of a charismatic speaker, it can veil the truth and disguise intentions.

The whole spirit of emotionalism in art and theatre was a particularly German preoccupation; the *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) period of the late eighteenth century, the early-nineteenth-century Romantic emphasis on instinct, Wagner's stirring leitmotifs of musical undercurrents, and the Expressionist shrill and histrionic demands for the *Shrei* (cry), are some of the major manifestations of emotionalism in German art. German aesthetics oscillate from pro to anti-emotionalism, and Brecht was part of this theoretical debate. For Brecht, fascism and emotionalism are intimately bound: the vivid mass assemblies of the Nazis and the *Führerkult* – the unequivocal following of the “leader” – was, for Brecht, a “grotesque emphasis on the emotional” and “the deterioration of Marxist teachings” that prompted him to stress “more forceful emphasis on the rational.”<sup>607</sup> Brecht satirizes Hitler in his play *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, where the protagonist rises to power through his ability to cull out empathy amongst the masses (a particularly insightful scene is where Ui takes acting lessons and learns how to use body language to evoke empathy). Brecht was skeptical of empathy in general; he viewed the Wagnerian opera as an intoxicating narcotic, leaving audiences in a catatonic state of inertia. Brecht's friend Walter Benjamin posited that “Brecht's drama eliminated the Aristotelian catharsis, the purging of the emotions through empathy with the stirring fate of the hero,”<sup>608</sup> because for Brecht empathy was the one emotion that kept audiences from deciphering how events and situations came to be. In empathetic theatre, he says, “The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play.” Empathy leads us to believe that human suffering is natural; he wanted audiences to see suffering as startlingly *unnatural* and thus unacceptable. Using Aristotle as a sounding board to reflect his theories, Brecht compared dramatic and epic theatre. In the dramatic theatre, the spectator says, “Yes, I have felt this way too – Just like me – It's only natural – It'll never change – The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are inescapable.” In epic theatre, the spectator says, “I'd never have thought it – That's not the way – That's extraordinary, hardly believable – It's got to stop – The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary.”<sup>609</sup> In his study of Brecht's theories, John White raises the critical point that the difference between dramatic and epic theatre is “not absolute antithesis but merely shifts in emphasis.”<sup>610</sup> Too often the differences are accentuated, missing the point of Brecht's desire to use the precepts of Aristotle but bringing them in line with the modern age.

Brecht is realistic, but not in the way Shaw and Ibsen were. He wanted audiences to be alert, not passive, seeing everything and aware of all the contradictions invested in the theatrical experience. “It is also a reality that you are sitting in a theatre,” he says, “and not with your eyes glued to a keyhole. How can it be realistic to try and gloss this over?”<sup>611</sup> Changing the concept of

realism from a nineteenth-century mode of depicting objective conditions actually keeps the “real” at bay. As a Marxist, he was concerned with the “means of production” – how the play is delivered is as important as what it says. For Brecht, naturalism’s omniscience was just as suspect as expressionism’s histrionics. Seeking greater authenticity, Brecht writes from a position of undefended intimacy with his subject, excruciatingly responsive to the complexities of what they encounter, as if every spasmodic rhythm of war or violence creates the choppy surfaces of his dramatic (epic) structure. His plays are counter-intuitive, designed to forestall melodramatic emotionalism and block sentimentality. Two ideas stimulated his imagination: montage, which he borrowed from film, and contradictions, which he drew from Marxist dialectics. Both would, he felt, inspire relevant change.

Montage – the use of juxtaposing images simultaneously – can adequately reflect a world overtaken by fragmentation and rupture. The give-and-take of history, theology, economy, and epistemology produces a consistently shifting foundation; theatre should reflect this accurately by juxtaposing different images and emotions one-against-the-other. Brecht in some ways was like Strindberg, believing that we lack a coherent identity; we are the product of economic or theological pressures. According to T. W. H. Metscher, “What Brecht was mainly concerned with were individual historical situations and the behavior of particular characters in these situations.”<sup>612</sup> The point of theatre is to evoke change, and the only way he believed change can occur is if we can analyze all the points of view presented before us in historical context. “We need a type of theatre,” Brecht insists, “which not only releases feelings, insights, and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself.”<sup>613</sup> In order to transform, contradictions must be visible. The bourgeois theatre, Brecht adds, “always aims at smoothing over contradictions, at creating false harmony, at idealization. Conditions are reported as if they could not be otherwise; characters as individuals, incapable by definition of being divided, cast in one block.” If there is development, “it is always steady, never by jerks, the developments always take place within a definite framework which cannot be broken through.”<sup>614</sup> The way to “break through” this rigid perception was by attending to the contradictions inherent in the social context of a scene, finding the right social gesture (what he called “gestus”) that captures societal relationships, and highlighting economic and political backdrops that inform action and behavior. The term “gestus” first appears in his essay “On Gestic Music” in 1932, and reappears repeatedly in Brecht’s articles. It defines attitudes of characters towards each other and events, but, as Patrice Pavis observes, it “has nothing to do with pantomime” and is devoid of “conventional gestures” or “expressive and aesthetic gestures (dance).” Rather, the actor controls the gestures “in order to indicate the character’s social attitudes and way of behaving.”<sup>615</sup> Gestus is meant

to partake in Brecht's Marxism, his way of highlighting class consciousness and social hierarchy. The Marxist dialectic, what Brecht called the "Great Method" (*Grosse Methode*), is, according to Fredric Jameson, "defined and constituted by the search for and discovery of contradictions," which yield "juxtapositions, dissonances, *Trennungen* [separations], distances of all kinds, in terms of contradiction as such."<sup>616</sup> Demonstrating contradictions was put to use as a way of substantiating Brecht's Marxism. Capitalism, for Brecht, was an irrational and brutal system because it substituted market caprice for the fulfillment of human needs. Though shunning party membership (Brecht was hardly a "joiner"), he was a dedicated Marxist, and it was the goal of his theatre to underscore the brutality of the capitalist system.

Brecht saw the theatre as a forum of social interaction. Communal living – the root and branch of Marxism – can be examined onstage. Theatre for him was a place to teach, not preach; to inculcate ideas, not hector. By observing (really seeing, not gaping) how people interact, and how this interaction might lead to a better world, audiences can learn how to live better. Like Shaw, Brecht wanted the theatre to entertain and instruct. However (though he admired Shaw), Brecht did not share Shaw's ultimate optimism; his vision of evil (he saw Nazism up close) left too deep an impression. He wanted us to see how there is a better alternative than the one we tend to embrace. Hence the title of his essay, "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction" – we must have pleasure in the theatre (he hated boredom as much as the next person) and we must learn, too. Before we can change, we have to learn what to change into. But he also knew the lure of authoritarianism, greed, and selfishness is never far from our appetites. Change for the sake of change had no appeal to him; he felt that many of the other "isms" of his time were mere puerile temper tantrums leading to a political cul-de-sac. Mother Courage doesn't have to change – we have to change, and most importantly, change our way of thinking. In this sense Brecht's theatre is a combination of theatricality and intellectualism. Theatre should be a place where the interaction of people can be observed like a laboratory. Change will not emerge from martyrdom; the only thing martyrdom can lead to is misappropriated energy. Brecht wanted us to think, to reason, to ask, "why is the world this way and not that way?"

During the 1930s Brecht experimented with several forms. *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* is Brecht in an unusually realistic style, presenting a cluster of interrelated short scenes examining the ways in which oppressive politics affected families, workers, and homelife during the early years of Nazi Germany. His Teaching Plays (*Lehrstücke*) consist of Marxist parables meant for workers' collectives. One particular play, *The Measures Taken*, concerns a group of Chinese revolutionaries who must decide to murder one of their comrades, not because he has betrayed them, but because he is clumsy, goes out on his own without following party orders, asserts his individuality, and disrupts

revolutionary activity. It is, in my view, an odious play, justifying murder as a “decision” on behalf of the whole, and far removed from his more sophisticated works. Lionel Abel asserts that *The Measures Taken* “may even be described as an experiment in submitting to implacable values” and the “one play of his, too, which comes close to tragedy.” It falls short of the tragic, he says, owing to the idea that “the victim in the play, destroyed because he is an individual, is only that abstractly, by definition. We never feel his individuality, and the recital of his death is not moving.”<sup>617</sup> I find the death “moving” in ways Brecht did not intend: fascistic and inexcusable. Nor is his musical, *The Threepenny Opera* (1929), entirely successful. There is stunning music written by Kurt Weill, and some of the story elements are engaging. But, as Raymond Williams observes, “The displacement of feelings about modern capitalism on to a group of pseudo-eighteenth century thieves and whores is no more than an escape clause. The real detachment, the real distancing, required a new principle and a new start.”<sup>618</sup> For this he had to move into another phase of playwriting.

### *Mother Courage and Her Children*

Written in Sweden on the eve of the Second World War, *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939) was meant as a warning to anyone conspiring with the Nazis that a pact with the devil carries a hefty price. The earthy, hard-scrabble, and garrulous Anna Fierling, a.k.a. Mother Courage, leads her entourage of three children – Swiss Cheese, her eldest, Eilif, and mute daughter, Katrin – as well as a smitten Chaplin, a bemused Cook, and a wily camp-follower prostitute Yvette, across the battle fields of Europe’s Thirty Years War (1618–1648), where Catholics and Protestants slaughtered each other in the name of land and religion. The carnage provided a gateway to a flourishing trade in stolen goods, and the larger towns and villages served as markets for the loot. Prior to the Thirty Years War, conflicts tended to be seasonal, conducted in friendly climates and nearby river basins or food-producing territories. But the ambitious Renaissance aristocracy, combined with the swelling of their armies, created unwieldy havoc and harrowing supply problems. The big field armies of the Thirty Years War contained tens of thousands of men as well as camp followers – wives, children, servants, concubines, and other hangers-on, who had to be clothed and fed, too. Amidst battle weary soldiers needing food, clothes, ammunition, fresh horses, and other items immediately, savvy marketers like Mother Courage sold their goods to these voracious consumers. The breakdown in organizational control, appalling supply lines, virulent diseases, chronic desertion, and the fact that many princes lacked the financial resources to carry on such large scale undertakings, led to a mass underground marketplace – a thriving, free-market capitalism unsullied by government regulations. Municipal decrees might ban or restrict occasional

trafficking, but it was impossible to keep pace with entrepreneurs hawking their bargains or advantageous pickings to a battered civilian and military population. Johann Grimmelshausen's novel of the period, *Simplicius Simplicissimus*, supplied Brecht with much of his information and described pawnbrokers swarming around soldiers, many of whom were gamblers needing cash for their dice games and other hedonistic activities. Moneylenders and prostitutes moved in trains of camp followers, capitalizing on the unbridled *laissez-faire* environment. Though the war was the result of religious clashes between Protestants and Catholics, the horrors stemmed less from religious zealotry than from lack of money and credit. No European state could afford a sustained war without bringing massive suffering to the civilian populations through taxation and pillaging. Soldiers often went unpaid for months, colossal blunders occurred in troop and supply movements, and chronic shortages of food, weapons, and horses created frustrated conscripts eager to buy goods from peddlers like Mother Courage. Marauding bands of conscripts terrorized the countryside. The images of chaos and violence in Brueghel's painting *Dulle Griet* reflect the war's inchoate carnage. This is why this war in particular was so appealing to Brecht: it was overwhelmingly the business of mercenaries. He wrote:

The Thirty Years War is one of the first gigantic wars waged by capitalism in Europe. But under and within capitalism it is extremely difficult for the individual to see that war is not necessary; for it is necessary within capitalism, namely for capitalism. The economic system is based upon a war of all against all, the great ones against the great ones, the little ones against the little ones. One would already have to recognize that capitalism itself is a misfortune, in order to recognize that war and the misfortunes it brings are bad – that is, unnecessary.<sup>619</sup>

Mother Courage obtains her name "Courage" because she charged through the battle lines selling fresh bread to both sides. "They call me Mother Courage," she says, "'cause I was afraid I'd be ruined, so I drove through the bombardment of Riga like a madwoman, with fifty loaves of bread in my cart. They were going moldy, what else could I do?"<sup>620</sup> The term "courage" typifies Brecht's de-familiarizing ideas: Mother Courage is not "brave" in the conventional sense, but needs to sell the bread as freshly as possible. Fresh bread garners a better price than stale loaves; her "courage" is merely a marketing strategy, a capitalist motivation built up by war's profiteering. Hungry soldiers longing for fresh bread will pay the higher price; with death looming around every bullet and cannon, why should soldiers "save" money or barter with Mother Courage? Her best "market strategy" is to get the fresh bread to exhausted soldiers; bullets had to be dodged across battle fields – hence she is "courageous." But now the term "courage" has a *contradictory* meaning: it is "estranged" from our common vernacular of "sacrificial heroism" and can be analyzed with greater discernment.

Brecht explains Courage's cavalier attitude towards her imprimatur as part of everyday business: "Business deals are accepted with the same boredom as descriptions of landscape in novels. The 'business atmosphere' is simply the air we breathe and pay no special attention to."<sup>621</sup> But for Brecht theatre helps us to *pay special attention* to it. Courage's "bravery" is now thrown into relief; we are not witnessing altruism and nobility, but rather profiteering and business savvy. Bravery is "made strange" – Courage doesn't brag about her exploits but shrugs them off as merely part of everyday business. The audience is expected not to follow the line of heroic development but to discern a pattern, pursue a more complex sense of reality, and achieve coherence about our world in a subtler manner.

Courage is one of the most complicated studies of contradiction in modern drama. She is brave, but cowardly; caring for her children, but up to a point; and she tergiversates allegiances from Catholic to Protestant and back again according to whichever side is hungry enough to purchase her species (food, clothes, and other sundry matters related to war). She claims her only goal is the safekeeping of her children, but her wagon of merchandise often takes precedence over anything else – her wagon, in fact, becomes an extension of her identity, her "profession" pursued with capitalistic vigor. Like the pimp Mackey in *Three penny Opera*, Mother Courage is an unabashed and unequivocal capitalist, invested in the ups and downs of consumer relationships. A combination of earth mother and war profiteer, she exploits when she can, and – like all capitalists who succumb to market fluctuation – often gets tripped up by her own machinations. "War is good business," she says repeatedly, but she occasionally stumbles in her lust for profit. She is a hustler, a hawker of her wares. She lacks the killer instinct of Brecht's Mack the Knife; she hasn't the intellect of Galileo, though she shares with him a vulnerability to authoritarian forces; and she cannot make the quick changes of personality needed to survive in the same manner as Shen-Teh in *The Good Person of Szechwan*. She rises and falls through the ebb and flow of market fluctuations. Yet she survives despite greater obstacles than any other Brecht character (and other characters in modern drama) because *she games the system*. She is inarticulate of her situation, but not of her actions; she understands the wheels of capitalism's buy-and-sell momentum. Roland Barthes notes that "Mother Courage is not equipped with what certain logicians have called meta-language, the language in which one speaks of a thing. Mother Courage talks in an objective language, her gestures are actions, uniquely destined to transform a situation, not to comment about it, to sing about it, or to justify it."<sup>622</sup> Desperate, cynical, clever, fearful, conniving, and thrust into circumstances beyond her control, Courage twists and turns, steering through the bottle-neck of war at every tight corner. Every gesture or action could mean success or death; gain or loss; boom or bust; and she traverses the stage like a giant maternal insect, a queen-bee leading her swarm and aware at every moment of death's suddenness through war's arbitrariness.



At a political level, Brecht's play makes an impassioned case for the rewriting of history from the perspective of the defeated – the victims and not the victors of history. Although the backdrop of the Thirty Years War and rise of fascism inform the play, Brecht is presenting the need for a new conception of history – from the bottom up. When the placards inform the audience of General Tilly's particular victory in a certain battle, we are also informed that Mother Courage has also lost twelve shirts – shirts that could have been sold for profit. Victory is therefore not a continuous progression and the belief in the inevitability of progress. Walter Benjamin wrote that "All rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers." The rulers carry their victories as "spoils," and victory is part of this; therefore "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."<sup>623</sup> Brecht fragments the structure of this play, moving from place to place, attempting to create a narrative in which understanding comes from sections rather than a totalizing and finished form. We are meant to grasp contradictory events, emotions, and relationships, undermining accepted ways of understanding, and making and remaking our identification with the story *a la* montage in order to see the underlying contradictions of history. The interrupted structure of the play – with placards, music, and other disruptive elements – instigates a discontinuous process; we are meant to see how history is produced, how we come to frame it in its rough-hewed and interrupting ebb and flow, rather than absorb it as an immovable given or stream of consciousness. Astradur Eysteinnsson posits that for Brecht, in order to get closer to real conditions, "the world as we see it must not simply be reproduced in another holistic mold. Rather, it has to be estranged, our imaginary relationship with it has to be interrupted."<sup>624</sup>

George Steiner wrote that the play is "an allegory of pure waste," because Mother Courage "refuses to grasp the plain truth that those who live by selling the sword shall perish by the sword." She is a "foolish creature" who "thinks she is advancing" but is "treading a mill of ruin."<sup>625</sup> I think this is mistaken: Courage does grasp the truth that living by selling the sword (or anything else not nailed down) is the *only way to live* in a capitalistic society. True her children die, but they die as a result of their resisting this truth, by joining armies or making heroic sacrifices, exemplified by Courage's daughter banging the drum on the roof to warn the other side. Her son Swiss Cheese is a victim of his "honesty": entrusted as paymaster for the Protestant army, when captured by the Catholics he refuses to give the cash box away. His "courage" parallels Tom Hanks in *Saving Private Ryan* and is dubious for Brecht. Kattrin's drumming at the end of the play also bears little difference to Hanks's actions; both make the "ultimate" sacrifice, both follow the traditional narrative of heroism in war, and both perish for it. Significantly, Mother Courage *does not perish*, and had her children listened to her, stood closely by her and remained silent, they, too,

might have surged onward. Courage drags her wares from battle to battle, because that is where the market resides; she knows that when soldiers are wounded and dying they will call for brandy to ease the pain, and she will be there to sell it to them for maximum profit; and when they need clean underwear because amidst combat-evoking fear they “pissed their pants,” she will be there to sell that, too. Her children have been devoured by the war, but this is not her fault; they have fallen for the “false consciousness” that Marx warned against – the false belief that heroism is truth, altruism is godly, and in a religious society the good are rewarded in heaven. For Brecht, martyrdom is foolish; it doesn’t change anything or set in motion a just society. It is, for him, nothing more than another death, another wasted life. The waste in the play is not Courage’s fault, either; she is no more capable of changing capitalism than any other fictional character. We must change conditions, not characters in a play. Steiner’s point that “a time shall come when nations lay down their arms by still waters” but “Courage keeps that time from coming nearer” places too much responsibility on fiction. For Brecht, modern drama does not solve our problems, but rather enables us to see them clearly. “Brecht would have us revile the old harpy for her stupid greed” misses the essential contradiction of the play.<sup>626</sup> The tragedy in the play, if there is any, is not Courage’s but capitalism’s brutality. As Jan Needle and Peter Thompson conclude, “this is not a play about an individual but about society,” and for Brecht, society is at fault, not the individual; the individual merely survives – games the system – under less-than-favorable conditions.<sup>627</sup> His indictment of capitalism in his plays of the 1930s onward is rooted in his Marxism, but more importantly in his skepticism of authority more generally. Everyone in this play, to a person, is the product of the same toxic society. Courage is simply making the best of a bad situation; she is *a businesswoman in a world that encourages business*. Courage, in Richard Gilman’s words, “is exemplary not in being a survivor but in being one at a terrible cost; her virtues thus function dramatically not as attributes to be admired but as annihilated possibilities to be mourned.”<sup>628</sup> Her children would have survived, too, if they had only followed her; and survival is all that can be accomplished in capitalism. “Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life,” Marx says, and Mother Courage has absorbed this axiom.<sup>629</sup> She lives in conditions that offer no other alternative but to sell, trade, and barter – even if bartering costs her the lives of her children. Brecht would not have us “revile the old harpy for her stupid greed,” but instead we should be appalled that a woman with no other opportunity – no other choice to succeed but through business – must endure this ruthless system. Mother Courage, Robert Brustein remarks, has dragged her wagon “over half of Europe, learning nothing.”<sup>630</sup> I think otherwise: she has learned that the only thing left for the clever poor under capitalism is survival. “Get through the day” is all that matters. Like a gambler, she places bets on the

odds; the point is to come away with winnings at the end of the day. She may lose a few, but the scheme is to game the system even when the system tries to beat her down. It is not that Courage “learns nothing,” but rather she comprehends all too well her circumstances which have led to the choices she makes, and it is time that we, the audience, catch up to her. Despite occasional miscalculations (like all gamblers she is subject to losses and surprises), she strategizes when to move to the next battle ground, and when to stay put; when to sell shirts, or to sell brandy; and when to speak, and when not to speak.

This last element, when to speak and when not, is crucial to the play’s most gut-wrenching moment. Because of Courage’s haggling and delay, she failed to save her son’s life. Two soldiers and a Sergeant arrive at her camp dragging the body of her son, Swiss Cheese. They drop the stretcher with the body before her. The Sergeant says:

Here’s a man we can’t identify. But he has to be registered to keep the records straight. He bought a meal from you. Look at him, see if you know him. (*He pulls back the sheet.*) Do you know him? (*Mother Courage shakes her head.*) What? You never saw him before he took that meal? (*Mother Courage shakes her head.*) Lift him up. Throw him in the carrion pit. He has no one that knows him (64).

According to Steiner, the performance of Helene Weigel in this scene left a deep and lasting impression. “As the body of her son was laid before her, she merely shook her head in mute denial. The soldiers compelled her to look again. Again she gave no sign of recognition, only a dead stare.” When the body was dragged away, Weigel “tore her mouth wide open,” the shape of which “was that of the screaming horse in Picasso’s *Guernica*.”<sup>631</sup> Here I agree with Steiner, and I would add Edvard Munch’s *Silent Scream* (1893), of which August Strindberg wrote: “A scream of fear just as nature, turning red from wrath, prepares to speak before the storm and thunder, to the bewildered little creatures who, without resembling them in the least, imagine themselves to be gods.”<sup>632</sup> Courage’s silent scream is the result of Brecht’s awareness of the modern world. Words are useless against a capitalist system’s relentless gluttony, feeding on death and the need to replace bullets and bodies with more bullets and bodies. Brecht shows how a single psyche can embrace many contradictory thoughts, and how naturally an extreme intelligence and street savvy can coexist with obtuseness and denial. To say that Mother Courage is blind to the grinding maw of capitalism is to acknowledge only a fraction of her range. Walter Kaufmann remarks that the play rises “to a pitch of pathos rarely equaled in the theatre in our century.”<sup>633</sup> The play demonstrates how human beings, amidst the crucible of war, protectively shield themselves from the most frightening truths of the historical moment. Courage’s silence does not mean she is unaware, but rather to speak up, get angry, or inveigh against the system is futile

(something Beckett will express in the coming years). Brecht makes this clear in the very next scene in which Mother Courage and a Young Soldier await their pay outside an officer's tent. The Young Soldier is livid; he saved the Colonel's horse and wants his reward. He has served the army faithfully, went out of his way to help, and is now enraged by injustice; the Colonel has spent the intended reward money for the Young Soldier on brandy and whores for himself. Even with the possibility of being locked up in the stocks for his visible outrage, he cries, "I won't stand for injustice," to which Courage replies: "You're quite right. But how long? How long won't you stand for injustice? One hour? Or two? You haven't asked yourself that, have you? And yet it's the main thing. It's pure misery to sit in the stocks. Especially if you leave it till then to decide you do stand for injustice" (66). Kneejerk reactions to injustice are futile temper-tantrums that lead to a cul-de-sac. Only a total change in the system can bring justice.

Courage is well aware of brutal authoritarianism – how it strips people of their spirit, rendering them toothless and impotent. The Young Soldier could choose martyrdom, make his case against the officers and seek retribution. But, as Brecht's Courage makes clear, such heroic-romantic choices are ineffectual. As Robert Leach puts it, "we should not imagine that Brecht is saying 'Don't bother to complain, don't rock the boat.' What he is saying is, 'Be aware of what complaining involves' and 'How can complaining change things?' He is interested in directing our attention towards the ways of complaining which will be effective."<sup>634</sup> Courage knows that in an entrenched, corrupt society, flight and capitulation are the only viable options. Survival and cowardice are the modern response to social conditions; like Andy Kragler in Brecht's early play *Drums in the Night*, Courage prefers to eat and sleep rather than fight the capitalist system. In Brecht's *Life of Galileo*, we will again see a protagonist choosing to capitulate in order to live.

### *Life of Galileo*

Galileo was a philosopher, astronomer, and mathematician – and history's archetype of the intellectual who opposed tradition and authority. In 1633, the Holy Office of the Catholic Church found him suspect of heresy because he believed the Sun, not the Earth, to be the center of the universe, and made his opinions known. The thought of death at the stake made him reverse his opinion. His desire to live rather than die a martyr played right into the hands of Brecht. The legend of Galileo muttering "*eppur si muove*" ("yet it [Earth] still moves"), meaning that Galileo still defied the Church, is more apocrypha than fact. But Brecht uses the trial as a theatrical device for the portrayal of human bravery (or lack of) and scientific veracity. Brecht's *Life of Galileo*, like

Brecht himself, placed reliance on empirical observation as indispensable to social progress. But Brecht also knew that observation was limited unless the principles of inquiry were grounded in reason – unless we “see” beneath the surface we will never understand.

Brecht wrote three versions of the play: the first, written in a hasty three weeks, in 1938; the second during his time in the United States, where he befriended the actor Charles Laughton and produced the English-language version in collaboration with him in 1947; and finally the East Berlin version in 1953 (premiering in 1955 in West Germany). In the first version, Galileo is a crafty old man who exaggerates his diminished sight in order to continue with his research; in the second version, he is driven by science to a greater degree; in the final version, the influence of the atomic bomb weighs on the play. The atomic bomb compelled Brecht to consider a world now engaged in the threat of nuclear annihilation. In each version Galileo stands, as we in the audience do, outside the play proper, observing it with a skeptical if sympathetic eye; we observe the play as he would – he is our proxy, voicing the kinds of thoughts that flicker through our minds. The play traces the path of his scientific discovery, finds that discovery challenged by authority, and the pressure to recant forces Galileo to retract his initial statements. Other than his assistant Andrea, his daughter Virginia, his friends the Little Monk and Sagredo, the characters are generally caricatures. The monks, priests, cardinals, and Pope are channeling agents serving as authoritarian obstacles to Galileo’s science.

But Galileo, like *Mother Courage*, is one of Brecht’s most complex and challenging roles. He is a glutton, corporeal and prone to overeating; he is a sensualist and hedonist (though Brecht resisted the perception of Galileo as Falstaff, there remain similarities); and he embarks on scientific inquiry that, for Brecht, revolutionizes the world, yet his curmudgeonly behavior prevents his daughter from marrying. The play’s fundamental conflict, science versus religion, plays out in several scenes gathered around Galileo’s research. The contrast between seeing and gawping or gaping (*Glotzen*) is made evident in the play’s opening scene. Throughout the play the ocular fields of perception are played out repeatedly, suggesting a metaphor for the way an audience sees plays in general. For instance, in the opening the housekeeper’s young son, Andrea, takes a curious interest in Galileo’s work, saying, “I can see with my own eyes that the sun goes down in a different place from where it rises. So how can it stay still?” To which Galileo sarcastically replies, “What do you see? Nothing at all. You just gawp. Gawping [*Glotzen*] isn’t seeing.”<sup>635</sup> The allegory of seeing reflects Einstein’s concept of relativity – who’s doing the seeing and from what perspective is the seeing being done. Galileo sits the young Andrea down in a chair and then moves the chair around an object, demonstrating that while the object appears to move (like the Sun), it is really the chair (hence, the Earth) that is moving. This tension between seeing and perceiving – trusting

the eye and seeing beneath the surface – is followed through in the play as a conflict between mathematical regularities in optics and telescopes (objectivity) and God's will (faith). When Galileo's theories of the Earth revolving around the Sun are exposed, Galileo's friend Sagredo enjoins Galileo to be cautious, saying, "What kind of person is said to go into things with his eyes open? One who is going to his doom" (33). In contrast to Galileo, the Mathematician defends Aristotle, saying, "I trust the evidence of my eyes," to which Galileo retorts, "I offer my telescope so they can see for themselves, and everyone quotes Aristotle" (41). No one in the play will look at Galileo's science, trusting only what has been written in historical stone.

For Brecht, Galileo learns early on in the play what Martin Jay calls "scopic regimes," the hegemonic and totalitarian perceptions of the world that dictate what we should see rather than what is there. Jay describes the first breakthrough as "Cartesian perspectivalism," a way of scientifically perceiving the world "that no longer read the world as a divine text, but rather saw it as situated in a mathematically regular spatio-temporal order filled with natural objects that could only be observed from without by the dispassionate eye of the neutral researcher." But even Cartesian perspective was dethroned by a "madness of vision," a palimpsest that echoes Brecht's notion that there lie events beneath events. As Jay notes, and Brecht would likely concur, "Glancing is not somehow innately superior to gazing; vision hostage to desire is not necessarily always better than casting a cold eye; a sight from the situated context of a body in the world may not always see things that are visible to a 'high-altitude' or 'God's eye' view."<sup>636</sup> We can no more make a fetish of the material world, for the world's motion – its temporality – makes the material unreliable. Rather than erect another hierarchy of science, it would be more useful to acknowledge a plurality of the visible. The changing nature of the atomic bomb forced Brecht to draw alternative conclusions to the play and to his world view. Any utopianism for Brecht remains out of the question, for the world's instability re-arranges our vision and redefines our understanding.

Frederic Ewen writes that "For sheer brilliance there are few scenes in Brecht to match that in which Cardinal Barberini, now Pope, is being attired."<sup>637</sup> As the relentless Inquisitor insists that Galileo be forced to deny his findings, the Pope yields to the argument as each garment of Papacy is worn. One of the most stirring scenes in the play is between Galileo and the Little Monk. The Little Monk, an avid supporter of Galileo's work, is nonetheless disturbed by his findings. The fact that the Earth is not the center of the universe calls God into question. The Monk recalls his parents and sister, who have devoted their impoverished lives to faith; that somehow an afterlife will reward them. The dim hope of redemption and recognition for a life well lived is now challenged by Brecht via Galileo. The power of this speech says much about Brecht the playwright: he willingly sets aside his polemics in order to present

a compelling case for religious beliefs. For the Little Monk, believers' lives have significance because they and their kind are part of a glorious religious unfolding. Their faith is suffused with expectation and hope; if they were to learn that their existence was simply a dead end, they would feel forsaken, that life was without meaning and purpose. What will happen to the peace of mind of the Monk's toiling parents if they are informed that everything they have put faith in is now in error? This is a remarkable speech because Brecht is giving full breath to the counter-argument against secular Marxism. The ending is unsatisfactory – Galileo throws a bundle of research papers on the floor for the Monk to grovel at, and the Monk's previous argument is apparently forgotten – because Brecht has painted himself into a corner, but what a marvelous corner to occupy. Galileo has no correct answer: he cannot dismiss the argument, nor shrug it off cavalierly. The Monk's case is solid.

Galileo survives because he knows how to *game the system*. Like Mother Courage, he lives on despite close calls and near-death experiences because he understands the system and maneuvers it the best way he can. He is not always successful; his journey through the labyrinth of power-relations has its ups and downs; like Courage, there are slips and near-misses (in games there are wins and losses), but in the end he walks away whole and alive. Galileo, like Courage, might not have the clever attitude of Azdak, but because of this Courage and Galileo are Brecht's finest and most complex characters (within Brecht's finest plays). They are like Brecht himself: contradictory individuals who survive despite hostile conditions. Galileo and Courage steep themselves in devices and tricks; lie, cheat, and betray; and in this way they expose the lies we live within every day. Brecht wanted to break the illusions of theatre not merely as a theatrical trick but as a means of showing audiences their own self-deception, to take spectators out of their hedonistic and culinary stupor and plunge them into reality, warts and all. Walter Sokel maintains that through his conversion to Marxism, "which overcame Brecht's nihilistic and quasi-existentialistic pessimism of his youth with the revolutionary optimism of a new world picture, lies the basis of his development of a consequential emphasis on dialectics and contradictoriness (*Widersprüchlichkeit*)."<sup>638</sup>

Seeking the unpredictable in contradictoriness is, for Brecht, the only means of survival. In capitalism one has to live by wits, cunning, and deceit, making do with what one can sell, barter, and exchange. There is no utopia, no "benevolent nature of humanity" that can overcome systematized oppression; nor is there an "inherent evil" in human nature in order to account for morally condemned deeds. Such transcendentalism was for Brecht an avoidance of reality and the only way to avoid such thinking was to take human beings, without prejudicial assumptions, as material beings unsullied by various systematic or theological philosophies. This way Brecht eschews the notion of "original sin" or Freudian psychological motivation and puts the conditions and actions squarely in the

material and historical situations that envelop and instigate motives. People are to be depicted in terms of needs and power relationships and these motives are subject to change and development. Consequently, there can be nothing fixed about people, only what Roland Barthes calls the “plasticity of history,”<sup>639</sup> what necessarily follows from determination as a being with needs and desires (food, desire, survival, etc.). Freedom can only be formulated in these contexts; there can be no metaphysical plane. Liberation cannot take refuge in mysticism or in the altruistic and lachrymose “goodness of mankind” that permeates films like *Saving Private Ryan*. When the focus turns to a “higher calling of sacrifice” the story’s message is cloaked in treacle theology – Christian martyrdom – that eviscerates materiality. That’s why Brecht put so much emphasis on eating, gluttony, and physical consumption – in order to bring us back again and again to the material body which is the characteristic of a human being. Brecht follows Marx’s lead when Marx said: “Man is directly a *natural being*,” who is “endowed with *natural powers* and *facilities*, which exist in him as tendencies and abilities, as *drives*”; as well as “a natural, embodied, sentient, objective being he is a *suffering*, conditioned and limited being, like animals and plants. The *objects* of his drives exist outside himself as objects independent of him, yet they are objects of his needs, essential objects which are indispensable to the exercise and confirmation of his faculties.” Hunger, for instance, “is a natural need; it requires therefore a nature outside itself, an object outside itself, in order to be satisfied and stilled.”<sup>640</sup>

Brecht’s plays demonstrate the brute force of confrontation and the capacity for human cruelty. Eric Bentley observed that the “*Brechtian world revolves about an axis which has sadism and masochism as its north and south poles* (Bentley’s emphasis).” In his plays, Bentley says, “Brecht saw the humanness in human nature swamped out by inhumanity, by the cruelty of what he first thought of as the universe and later as capitalist society. The standard ending of Brecht plays is the total victory of cruelty.” For all the analysis of his plays lacking emotion, what ought to be said is Brecht’s “lack of pleasant emotions.” Being tortured, Bentley concedes, “is a violent emotional experience, and Brecht’s characters, from the earliest plays on, live (it is his own metaphor, taken from Rimbaud) in an inferno.”<sup>641</sup> Unless the inferno (i.e. capitalism) is disabled, dismantled, or dissolved, Brecht and his characters will “game” the blaze in such a way as to get by un-singed, or at least only burned slightly.



# Part VII

## The Divided Self of American Drama

*How may a man make of the outside world a home? How and in what ways must he struggle, what must he strive to change and overcome within himself and outside himself if he is to find safety, the surrounding of love, the ease of soul, the sense of identity and honor which, evidently, all men have connected in their memories with the idea of family?*

– Arthur Miller<sup>642</sup>

*The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.*

– W. E. D. Du Bois<sup>643</sup>

*What the hell was it I wanted to buy, I wonder, that was worth – Well, no matter. It's a late day for regrets.*

– Tyrone, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Eugene O'Neill<sup>644</sup>

In *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), William James asserts that “*a man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his*, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account.” These amalgams, James maintains, guide emotional states: “If they wax and prosper, he feels triumphant; if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down, – not necessarily in the same degree for each thing, but in much the same way for all.” James divides the Self – this jig-saw puzzle of being – into three parts: material, social, and spiritual. The material is the body and belongings, which “is the innermost part of *the material Self* in each of us” and the “parts of our wealth most intimately ours are those which are saturated with

our labor.” The social arises from “the recognition which he gets from his mates,” meaning “*a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him* and carry an image of him in their mind. To wound any one of these his images is to wound him. [...] A man’s *fame*, good or bad, and his *honor* or dishonor, are names for one of his social selves.” The spiritual belongs to “man’s inner or subjective being, his psychic faculties or dispositions, taken concretely.”<sup>645</sup> This imbricated Self took root in the American psyche, where each Self requires satisfaction and all the Selves clamor for attention. What Richard Gale calls James’s “Promethean pragmatism” was his attempt “to show us a way to have it all, or at least as much of it as we mortals can realistically hope to have,” and *having it all* necessitated “that all our many selves have their desires satisfied.”<sup>646</sup> The emphasis is not on *a* satisfaction, but *many*, and that our sense of self is not singular and absolute but plural and contingent. The American voracious appetite – the oversized avarice for things, fame, acceptance, and the by-now clichéd notion of the “American dream” – would become grist for modern American drama.

By the 1930s, American modern drama’s reputation emerged from under European dominance. “Until Eugene O’Neill appeared upon the scene,” George Jean Nathan said, “the American drama offered little for the mature European interest.”<sup>647</sup> What inspired “interest” in American drama was (among other things) the divided selves. Dramatists focused on the divide in several ways, depicting assimilationism versus ethnic roots; materialism versus spiritualism; conformity versus iconoclasm; fame versus alienation; reality versus illusion; and belonging versus ostracization. Within the multiple threads in the larger American weave, Irish, Jewish, Italian, black, Latino, southern, gay, immigrant, and marginalized groups in general moved, often in tandem, to center stage of American drama, examining the divide between personal and public selves. The ethnic, sexual, and conscious awakening of the characters in the plays examined here formed the “golden age” of American (Broadway) drama.

For Americans, the Puritan emphasis on the “Word,” with its certainty of biblical prophecy through private Bible reading and public sermonizing, created an ethos of consciousness – or, more accurately, consciousness-raising, which led to a cult of self-scrutiny. The divisive consciousness embroiled moral righteousness versus aggressive entrepreneurialism, and collectivism versus self-reliance. Artists responded to this in multiple ways: the poet Walt Whitman embraced it, declaring with brio “I contradict myself, (I am large. I contain multitudes),”<sup>648</sup> but the civil rights leader W. E. B. Du Bois was less sanguine. As James’s student at Harvard, Du Bois absorbed and extended his teacher’s tutelage of the divided self, famously etching the words “double-consciousness” into the African American vernacular: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of

others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."<sup>649</sup> This axiom could, with a few adjustments, be applicable to characters in dozens of modern American plays.

The conflict of a divided self meant confidence versus failure. Confidence derives from early Puritan thought and took root in the "bounce-back" notion of American resiliency, the idea that with Emersonian self-reliance and fortitude one can overcome adversity. Failure was political: American moderns, writes Christine Stansell, were committed "as much to matters of cultural taste and innovation as to social reform."<sup>650</sup> The authors were social critics wishing to reveal the contrast between devotion to capitalism and the wasteland of those unable to succeed. Moderns in particular were influenced by the ideals of the "Popular Front," a broad-based social movement emerging in the 1930s that was, according to Michael Denning, "the ground on which the workers' theaters, proletarian literary magazines, and film industry unions stood," creating "a radical social-democratic movement forged around anti-fascism, anti-lynching, and industrial unionism."<sup>651</sup> The dramatists' "jeremiads," to borrow Sacvan Bercovitch's term,<sup>652</sup> amounts to a rejection of America as it is – spiritually vapid (O'Neill), infatuated with success (Miller), mendacity (Williams), bigotry (Hellman), and racism (Hansberry) – for the sake of creating an America as it *ought to be*. Characters in their plays overanxiously and overzealously proclaim their loyalty to wealth and prosperity while simultaneously discovering the pitfalls of such enthusiasm. The dramatists were liberal-progressives whose characters are bereft of interior happiness as they doggedly pursue material gain or social acceptance.

The themes of the divided self confront, in one way or another, the notion of salvation through authentic selfhood. "The relationship between psychic uncertainty and rhetorical self-assertion," Sacvan Bercovitch posits, characterizes much of American culture: "With every setback, the assertion of American selfhood rose to a higher pitch."<sup>653</sup> Selfhood as a motive for salvation would sustain early settlers, ameliorate anxieties, and this would translate thematically into identity-forming ideas of "work-ethic," "rugged individualism," and the "authenticity of experience." Experience, in particular, offered the assurance of authenticity in self-definition. "Experience," according to the American philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce, "is the course of life. The world is that which experience inculcates."<sup>654</sup> Experience assured clarity and certainty in an uncertain world and offered artists a "heightened vitality," as the American philosopher John Dewey put it, that signified "complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events."<sup>655</sup> Experience and authenticity allowed Americans to sustain their independent modernism against a European

modernism stressing theory and abstraction. In James's well-known axiom from his book *Pragmatism*, the pragmatist (read here as a surrogate for "American modernist") "turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins," and turns towards "concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power."<sup>656</sup> Facts, action, and experience are the philosopher's litmus test. According to Martin Jay, "Americans frequently drew on the rhetoric of experience as a source of legitimation against rational abstraction or the deadweight of unexamined authority."<sup>657</sup> Writers from Whitman to Herman Melville, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, and Norman Mailer considered self-defining experience as a cosmic repository – a salvation of selfhood, as Bercovitch reminds us – that held at bay the meaninglessness of an existential void. As Zora Hurston put it at the end of her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, "Ya got to go there to know there,"<sup>658</sup> the "there" being a living experience, or, in Whitman's words, "*I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there.*"

Experience was the trough that most American artists drew from: social realists, Abstract Expressionists, psychological existentialists – all looked to experience as the feature most definitive of America. The "American Experience," the "Black Experience," Dewey's "*Art as Experience*," William James's "experiencing the cash value of an idea," Gatsby's "self-made millionaire," the road travelled by the Beats, and more – put stock in experience as a journey towards self-awareness and authenticity. In American poetry "experience," Angus Fletcher contends, "means *living through an event*, with an accent on the word 'living.'"<sup>659</sup> The American artistic landscape rejected the perceived inauthenticity of continental Europe, with its fustian notions of "presence layered in absence" and where everything is "mediated by language." When Willy Loman dreams of a garden in his backyard, when Edmund tells his father about the sea, when Maggie tells Brick about her hardscrabble upbringing, or when Walter Lee Younger tells his mother about cash-in-hand that can overcome racism, the value of living experience is exemplified and the idea of snatching victory from the jaws of defeat is crystallized. Fitzgerald's aphorism "there are no second acts in America lives" is wrong; redemption, it was believed, can, through self-defining experience, lead to a second act – provided that inauthenticity is purged.

If American modernism made experience its insignia, then authenticity was its actualization. Everything in the plays resounds with authenticity; every character is measured by his or her authentic voice through the discovery of being "true to oneself." While the American pre-modern Victorian age of the 1880s created "the cult of sincerity," which betokened an intense mode of personal candor, the American moderns of the 1890s and beyond replaced it with "authenticity." Miles Orvell contends that "one might define the culture



*Parson Weems Fable*, Grant Wood (1939)

of authenticity in the early twentieth century as one that would restore, through the work of art, a lost sense of ‘the real thing.’”<sup>660</sup> American modernism was a representational theory that was experiential, scientifically defensible, and compellingly believable (authentic) in the artistic imagination. As T. J. Jackson Lears explains, the roots of American modernism were vested in the “*fin-de-siècle* yearning for authentic experience” in which the “real” could be “viscerally perceived.”<sup>661</sup>

There is, however, a paradox in the notion of “authenticity” that underscores the American modernist theme of truth and self-deception. Appearance and reality do not always coincide; faith and conviction can commit to a false idealism; and expressions of a “truthful self” cannot always differentiate between the real and the illusory. The past and the present do not always align in linear progression. The artist Grant Wood, a representative of American “authentic” regionalism (along with Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry), expressed a dual consciousness of characters living in an elegiac present yet longing for a pristine past. In Wood’s *Parson Weems Fable* (1939), the apocryphal story of General George Washington is illuminated by Parson Mason Locke Weems’s 1806 biography of the first United States President. In this highly theatrical painting above, Wood portrays Weems pulling back the curtain, revealing Washington reenacting the famous myth. Washington, the

fabrication goes, admitted to his father that he cut down the cherry tree, saying: "I can't tell a lie." Like Abraham Lincoln's moniker "honest Abe," Washington's truth-telling epitomized an American faith in authenticity. Paradoxically, the story itself is a lie which is held as an exemplary model of truth-telling – the essential feature of which never actually occurred. Moreover, *Parson Weems' Fable*, writes Wood's biographer R. Tripp Evans, "highlights the angry confrontation between father and son." If the original story by Parson Weems is one of clemency and forgiveness, "then Wood's image projects only anxiety of impending punishment – a distortion that reflects [Wood's] frequently esoteric approach to history."<sup>662</sup>

Similarities abound in modern American drama: when, for instance, Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* tells his father, Big Daddy, that "Mendacity is a system that we live in,"<sup>663</sup> he expresses his animus towards "deception" that is a fundamental American trait. Yet Brick lives a deception, denying his best friend's homosexuality and perhaps his own, too, and Brick, like Willy-Biff or Edmund-Tyrone, shares an intense father-son relationship with Big Daddy. Grant Wood's painting foregrounds Washington's story as myth, and Wood's tongue-in-cheek point is that we require "mendacity" or what Eugene O'Neill calls self-delusional "pipe dreams" to live. In modern American drama, the divided self wrestles with deception and authenticity. According to Martin Jay, "The powerful legacy of ruthless Puritan self-examination and insistence on interpersonal transparency – the antimonastic, uncloistered attitude of 'holy watchfulness' designed to root out signs of sinful behavior – left its mark on the political culture of the new nation."<sup>664</sup> Transparency grew under American Pragmatism in the twentieth century, and in American modern drama the idea of the dissembler practicing on others is less compelling than that of the *self-deceiver*, or, as Lionel Trilling put it, "The deception we best understand and most willingly give our attention to is that which a person works upon himself."<sup>665</sup> Each play examined here is, to varying degrees, about self-deception inherent in the divided self.

# Chapter 18

## Illusions

Despite his popularity, Eugene O'Neill was and still is frequently pilloried by critics. Eric Bentley, for instance, dismissed him as “silly,” “no thinker,” and “false in a particularly unpleasant way.”<sup>666</sup> Harold Bloom, though less abrasive, argued nonetheless that comparing O'Neill to Samuel Beckett “is hardly fair, since Beckett is infinitely the better artist, subtler mind, and finer stylist.” If Beckett “writes apocalyptic farce,” O'Neill, Bloom contends, “doggedly tells his one story and one story only, and his story turns out to be himself.”<sup>667</sup> These assertions are peculiar given O'Neill's chameleon-like body of work and a farrago of intellectual inquiry into various dramaturgies. His plays range from expressionist experimentations to psychological subtext. His one, overarching theme is not so much “him,” as Bloom asserts, as is his indictment of certain anemic corners of the modern American experience – spiritually sapped by bourgeois values, rote religious observance, American dream fatigue, and jingoistic pride. His plays have endured in part because he has captured and defined the divided self in American consciousness: success versus spiritual emptiness. Or, as John Patrick Diggins posits, his characters “feel the tug of a divided self that eludes the mind. Believing in reason, they respond to emotion; hungering for freedom, they are haunted by memory; defeated by reality, they are driven by illusion.”<sup>668</sup>

O'Neill spent most of his artistic life dissecting and diversifying the skills that first earned him his reputation as a playwright: the ability to write in multiple genres and explore many facets of American life. As an artist driven by curiosity and a painful past, his diverse range of styles resulted from and was influenced by his many motivations: Catholicism; nihilism; passion for the underdog; Ibsen and Strindberg; obsession with psychology and family; and the desire to be modern in step with his times. Like Arthur Miller, he wanted to yoke the

idea of Greek tragedy into modernism by building on attic themes while establishing new idioms, vernacular, and sensibility. He noted early in his career (1922) ideas that would underscore his artistic output:

Tragedy has the meaning the Greeks gave it. [...] It roused them to deeper spiritual understanding and released them from the petty greeds of everyday existence. When they saw a tragedy on the stage they felt their own hopeless hopes ennobled in art. [...] The point is that life itself is nothing. It is the dream that keeps us fighting, willing – living! [...] A man wills his own defeat when he pursues the unattainable. But his struggle is his success! [...] Such a figure is necessarily tragic.<sup>669</sup>

Eugene O'Neill (1888–1953) was born into a wealthy but haunted family. His father, a poor Irish immigrant turned successful matinee-idol, squandered his talents for the sake of commercial gain; his mother, educated and devout Catholic, dissipated herself in morphine addiction which began with Eugene's childbirth; and his brother, the ultimate debaucher, was consumed by self-destructive intoxication. O'Neill was the unwanted youngest and precocious son of two narcissistic prima donnas, saturated in Catholicism, booted out of Princeton, escaped a brush with death (but carried the burden of TB for the rest of his life), attempted suicide in a bar, and though a child of privilege, lived deliberately among the poor and malcontent. He received three Pulitzer Prizes and was the only American dramatist to receive the Nobel Prize (posthumously), yet he shunned the glory and fame. He went through a period of high recognition during the 1920s, a lull during the 1930s, and produced his most enduring works during the 1940s. Tony Kushner observes that although O'Neill's early plays "are messy, sometimes embarrassing," underneath one can glean "the authority and audacity of an important writer" despite "the awkward beginnings." He lived among poor fisherman, long wharf prostitutes, Bowery bums, gangsters, con artists, hucksters, communists, miscreants, and mostly self-deluded dreamers, writing "with obstreperous ugliness and a kind of carnal glee about abortion, prostitution, [...] class, murder, and suicide." He experimented with many dramatic forms – expressionism, realism, interior monologues spoken aloud, masks, split characters, recreations of nightmares – almost anything available on the modernist menu. As Kushner surmises, "O'Neill was attempting, almost from the beginning of his career, to move beyond empathy, compassion and outrage to something else, seeking some tremendous meaning which, he discerned, was beckoning vaguely on the other side of emotion and intellect."<sup>670</sup>

After a series of seafaring one-acts, O'Neill burst onto the 1920s with an array of successes. *Beyond the Horizon*, a brother rivalry play that would foreshadow his later sibling dramas, had a moderate Broadway success. Despite



its melodramatic flair, it dealt honestly with his personal experiences and interests (disease, wrong choices in love, and death), as well as the desire to escape the mundane existence on a farm – to live “beyond the horizon” (farm life would be another reoccurring theme). In *The Emperor Jones*, also successfully produced in 1920, the African American island despot, Brutus Jones, is systematically stripped of his dignity and majesty. Throughout the short one-act play, Jones discards all characteristics that separate his humanity from his primal urges. Originally performed by the great American actor Charles Gilpin, O’Neill’s relentless play plunges into Jungian regression and bestiality. The glamorization of the primitive, which was a ubiquitous though perverse motif of modernism, was deployed as a counterintuitive panacea to the over-civilized notion of bourgeois-mechanized-urbanized life. According to Joel Pfister, “Recovering the primitive became tantamount to restoring one’s ‘deeper’ humanity,” yielding “the precarious but irresistible adventure of stripping off ‘the veneer of civilization.’”<sup>671</sup> Criticized for rehashing minstrelsy and black stereotypes (with its boilerplate black dialect), *The Emperor Jones* nevertheless exudes a compelling character study of a former railroad porter and convict turned emperor and then driven mad by unconscious and conscious fears. The divided self between civilization and primal instinct is shown to be a thin divide. As Jones divests himself of his authority, O’Neill illuminates the aims of expressionist drama: to reveal the inner core of the human heart by pitting our frailty against the shadowy forces of Jungian collective nightmares. The play traces the fall of Jones, his tragic journey of interior doubts and plagued by his demons. *The Hairy Ape* (1922) is another expressionist drama, but this time containing socialist overtones. Hank is a coal stoker in the bowels of a steam ship, a gritty working-class lumpenproletarian who, upon gazing at the wealth of New York’s Fifth Avenue upper-crust, is transformed into conscious awareness of his social status as little more than an “ape.” Throughout the 1920s O’Neill explored a myriad of dramatic styles in a probative desire to get at the core of modernism. In *Desire Under the Elms*, the Oedipal instinct unravels as the son Eben Cabot mourns the death of his mother and rages against his father, Ephraim, and his new bride. But no sooner does he protest than his sexual appetite surfaces equally for the new bride, Abbie. *Strange Interlude* (1927) employs the idea of an interior monologue spoken aloud and *Mourning Becomes Electra* turns the Aeschylean trilogy into an American Civil War idiom. In each play, Zander Brietzke notes, “He tries to penetrate the mask of character only to discover that a multitude of different masks lie underneath.”<sup>672</sup>

By the late 1930s his output waned. He drafted a cycle of plays dealing with American history, loosely titled *A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed*, which, according to Matthew Wikander, “was to trace a single family from the American revolution to the twentieth century; the surviving plays of the Cycle

show this family to be recognizably configured like O'Neill's."<sup>673</sup> The central character is Simon Harford, whose "split personality symbolized a rending duality in American life, a basic condition in which the forces of greedy materialism were ascendant and threatening to destroy all that was ennobling in our national heritage," writes O'Neill's biographer, Louis Sheaffer.<sup>674</sup> O'Neill describes his motives for the Cycle: "America is the greatest failure in history. It was given everything, more than any other country in history, but we've squandered our soul by trying to possess something outside it, and we'll end as that game usually does, by losing our soul and the thing outside it, too."<sup>675</sup> O'Neill was fond of quoting the Bible, "For what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" He eventually abandoned the cycle, turning his attention to the people he most admired, the bar-losers of his youth and the divided souls of his family.

Conventional wisdom suggests that O'Neill rejected his youthful experimentations and settled more or less into realism. His two late-career masterpieces – *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, the latter produced after his death – reveal his personal journey and the emotional tremors that haunted his life. The final plays (including *The Moon for the Misbegotten*) concern the psychological level of despair when one sacrifices goals and dreams for material comfort. But this theme was inherent in O'Neill from the beginning, the realistic style of the last plays being simply a matter of formal changes. The theme of *Long Day's Journey into Night* is the emotional and spiritual consequences occurring when one succumbs to the exigencies of material security – a theme replete in virtually every O'Neill play. Certainly O'Neill's career begins with observations of the world and moves inwardly, from the grandiloquent to the minutia, from high emotional pitch to introspective reflection. The woozy seafaring speech Edmund recites to his father in *Long Day's Journey into Night* is autobiographical, but it is also nostalgia for the spirituality of his youth that, like his father, had to be sacrificed for the consumer comforts that mark the American psyche. But this idea is, more or less, in *The Great God Brown*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *More Stately Mansion*, *The Hairy Ape*, *Strange Interlude*, etc. Fintan O'Toole maintains that O'Neill succeeded as a playwright "because his engagement with his father's fate gave his philosophical pessimism a connection with intimate psychological experience and with the vividly vulgar nature of popular theatre as well. If O'Neill seems close, especially in his early plays, to melodrama, it is because he brings the gothic imagination of nineteenth-century Irish literature to bear on twentieth-century America."<sup>676</sup> O'Neill also brings the sense of missed opportunity he observed in his father, a gifted Shakespearean actor who gave up his loftier pursuits to enact popular melodrama. His father's despair, given his forceful personality, infected his family. O'Neill inherited his father's enthusiasm and despondency, and this energy and pessimism, also derived from Schopenhauer and

Nietzsche, would define his artistic goals. He wrote in 1920 that his “direst grudge” against *The Count of Monte Cristo* (the play his father owned and performed) “wrecked my father’s chance to become one of our finest actors.” His father told O’Neill in confidence that the play was “his curse” because he “had fallen for the lure of easy popularity and easy money.” In the end “My father died broken, unhappy, intensely bitter, feeling that life was a ‘damned hard billet to chew.’” These words left an indelible impression on O’Neill (“seared on my brain”), which bore forth this O’Neill axiom: “remain true to the best that is in me though the heavens fall.”<sup>677</sup>

In *The Iceman Cometh*, O’Neill creates a bar filled with has-beens living on illusion and pipe dreams. The disjunction between conscious hope and unconscious negation of hope (mixed with guilt) is materialized for O’Neill in *The Iceman Cometh*, where characters teeming with desires run headlong into unsatisfied dreams. O’Neill’s play takes place in Hope’s saloon (the name an unhidden symbol) in which its denizens are celebrating a birthday party and await the arrival of Hickey, a traveling salesman who makes periodic visits to the saloon for his ritualistic debauchery. However, Hickey’s arrival comes with unexpected baggage; he is now on the wagon and wants to redeem his fellow tipplers by having them face the “truth.” He singles out each and enjoins them to turn their illusions into reality, saying: “I meant [to] save you from pipe dreams. I know now, from my experience, they’re the things that really poison and ruin a guy’s life and keep him from finding any peace. If you knew how free and contented I feel now. I’m like a new man. And the cure for them is so damned simple, once you have the nerve. Just the old dope of honesty is the best policy – honesty with yourself, I mean. Just stop lying about yourself and kidding yourself about tomorrow” (610). To the others his arrival and sobriety are a semaphore from another planet; the patrons can hardly believe his words or his gestures, until he systematically punctures each illusion and deflates every blowhard in the bar.

Thanks to Hickey, each character comes to the sobering reality that their dreams are delusional and that people are fated to endure life freighted with un-satiated desires. Hickey is splashing a cold dose of reality on the pipe dreams. While he succeeds in sobering up most – he is a talented salesman, after all – the characters are thrown into the raw existence of life and find sobriety unpalatable. As they traverse their individual realities, they realize that pipe dreams are no more than a thin tissue of lies and self-deception. They have avoided reality, ensconced in Hope’s saloon, with each leaning on the others’ false projections of prior successes when in fact their dreams have long since faded and the successes were exaggerations at best. Still, the pipe dream is more tangible, satisfying, and visceral to the patrons of the bar than any shape it takes in reality. This is because for each – and what Hickey fails to grasp – reality is mere drudgery, boredom, and inconsequentiality; since we are all fated to death, the

material is fleeting and the dream (what Ibsen called the “life-lie”) is more desirable. Though O’Neill was heavily influenced by Ibsen, Strindberg, and Nietzsche, it is Schopenhauer’s descriptions of life that ramify throughout O’Neill’s work. “Life itself,” Schopenhauer says, “is a sea full of reefs and whirlpools that a person avoids with the greatest of caution and care, even though he knows that, if he should succeed in winding his way through every effort and artifice, he is with every step just by that fact nearing the greatest, the total, the unavoidable and unsalvageable shipwreck, indeed steering right toward it – death: this is the final goal of that arduous journey, and worse to him than all the reefs he has avoided.” Given O’Neill’s love of the sea, the obvious seafaring metaphors would have appealed to him, but more enticing is Schopenhauer’s notion of life’s fruitless journey, “The ceaseless efforts to banish suffering accomplish nothing beyond altering its form.”<sup>678</sup> Life is merely inner vanity wrapped in outer delusion, our self-importance triumphing over cold-blooded facts.

Death, then, is the ultimate release, the final mockery of dreams and reality, which O’Neill explored as early as 1914, in a letter to Jessica Rippin, the superintendent of Gaylord Farm Sanatorium: “all us poor midgets with our fretful whining cry, our feeble droning wail of impotence – dreams and thin dust of illusions which will vanish when the dreamer vanishes and be one with the same oblivion. And above and around us the ever-mocking laughter of those immortal and immoral Gods.”<sup>679</sup> Guilt, however, is the one thing Hickey cannot shake; for all his manipulating he experiences unimaginable guilt. O’Neill reportedly said, probably tongue-in-cheek, that the play’s title has a twofold meaning: “The chief character is a salesman. There is the salesman’s old story that when he is stewed he would go sobbing around from table to table in bars, handing out a picture of his wife and blubbering about ‘my poor wife.’ ‘But she’s safe,’ the salesman would say, ‘I left her in bed with the iceman.’” The “deeper meaning” of the title, he goes on to say, probably seriously, is “connected with death.”<sup>680</sup> Hickey’s murder of his wife leaves him grievous yet purged, guilty yet free, and in the end his ambiguous confession has less to do with him than with the others, who restore themselves (with few exceptions) to boozy self-deception. Only Hickey’s guilt – steeped in the author’s Catholicism – remains un-resolved and un-absolved. As Stephen Black observes, for O’Neill, “Christianity did not imply the possibility of infinite mercy, forgiveness, and redemption, but only external guilt, moral damnation for what he could not have controlled, and lifelong self-loathing.”<sup>681</sup> By the end of the play Hickey’s self-confidence crumbles, and as he is led away by the police he makes his last grasp at an insanity plea to Harry Hope, saying: “You know I must have been insane, don’t you, Governor?” Hope replies, “Who the hell cares?” Though Hope retracts these remarks with sympathy towards Hickey, it is too late; Hickey’s guilt in the larger scheme of things is a reality

that, like all other realities, is too painful to bear. The authenticity in this play belongs to the denizens of the bar, who have found solace and self-identity in the woozy fog of drink and illusion.

If *nuda veritas*, the naked or sobering truth, is the theme of *The Iceman Cometh*, then *Long Day's Journey into Night* is the flip side of the same coin, what Jamie in the play calls “‘*in vino veritas*’ stuff” (820) – the intoxicating truth. Like *Iceman*, the truth in this play is slowly peeled back, and what is discovered is sordid and perhaps better left covered. Una Chaudhuri maintains that the “conflictual structure of O’Neill’s harrowing play,” *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, results in what she calls “a geopathic dramaturgy, in which every character and every relationship is defined by a problem with place.”<sup>682</sup> This is true, but only tells half the story. Undoubtedly the Tyrone family, with its wealth and sorrows, is forced to confront their past in one abode. But the play also relies on time: everything in it reflects the temporal. It is, indeed, a *long* day’s journey, with each scene stretched, elongated, and filled with enough guilt, resentment, and remorse to carry a lifetime of psychoanalysis. The play’s plot is simple: the youngest son Edmund has returned from the sea with a bout of TB and is about to enter a sanatorium; his older brother is on the slippery slope of suicidal drunkenness; Mary, their mother, is hopelessly addicted to morphine (despite all efforts for recovery); and the father is a bitter Irish immigrant who abandoned a potentially artistic acting career for the lucrative rewards of repeatedly performing a stale melodrama.

Everything in the play is drawn from O’Neill’s personal history, but more than biography, *Long Day’s Journey into Night* cracks open the opaque shell of human defensiveness, painstakingly slowly, teasing out temporally the tangled circuitry of self-delusion, regret, and recrimination. His simple canvas is a four-way conflict of father, mother, and brothers (there is a brief appearance of a maid) and each character provides much information about their past as well as topics such as land, religion, Ireland, immigration, literature, art, philosophy, theatre, and more. But the data flows through the arteries of his characters, just as it had done in the plays of Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov. Like them, O’Neill attenuates to the quiet drama of interior life while simultaneously illuminating the fraught transactions within the familial world. From the opening of the play there is something askew contradicting the peaceful setting; the eight-thirty AM morning breakfast in the living room of the Tyrone house is all gusto and good cheer, masking illusions and a haunting past – as well as the torments to come. The percolating anguish lies just below the surface, each layer of defensiveness slowly melting in the face of withering accusations and guilt. The heckling dialogue drenched in remorse and spite peels back layers of truth. O’Neill understood that vindictiveness, which is rampant in the play, runs hand-in-hand with truth: it is what gives vindictiveness its potency. Truth is the essential force of the play, the back-and-forth jousting of each character

as they deflect probes into their truth by throwing the truth back at the other. The family resembles many well-meaning households for whom “home” is a citadel of deception. The episodes of ritual eating, card-playing, stabs at recollections, drinking – attempt to find a glimmer of joy amidst failure. All efforts at peace are tenuous, the mere threads of civility crumbling under withering personal attacks. Jamie squanders his opportunities and the three others let him know it; Edmund rebels only to limp home ill and disillusioned; Mary fails to curtail a morphine addiction she adamantly denies; and Tyrone regrets decisions that brought him fame and wealth – and artistic dissatisfaction.

Time works on the audience through dialogue that equivocates; characters apologize then go right back to their drumming accusations. The world comprises unrelenting self-destructive and self-inflicting behavior; scene after scene uncaps reckonings long repressed; yet they all end with an apology, regret, and outpouring of love, only to begin anew the resentful spite. The dialogue is dizzily turgid, full of transitions, changing moods (motivated by guilt, drink, and drugs), and the tension between brutality and tenderness oscillates over the course of the play. The result is cumulative; the scenes are mere pieces of a larger picture. To understand O'Neill means to endure his long-windedness, to take into account that time is his playwriting tool. Brevity and pithiness are not his *métier*; rather, like Shaw, O'Neill weighs in with a tonnage of saturating words. Largely his loyal supporter, the critic George Jean Nathan nonetheless remarks that O'Neill “always goes aground on the rocks of exaggeration and overemphasis.” In his faulty efforts to emulate Strindberg, Nathan maintains that he falls woefully short because he “piles psychological and physical situation on situation until the structure topples over with a burlesque clatter. Strindberg magnified the psyche of his characters. O'Neill magnifies their action.”<sup>683</sup> To say this, I think, is to miss the point. Time for O'Neill is an infinity stretching behind and ahead of us; time organizes all of our thoughts, and this is where the problem lies. We could escape space; Edmund tries to do this by seafaring, Jamie by habituating whore houses and bars, Mary through her drug-induced fog, and Tyrone through his acting career; but we cannot escape time. There is hardly any “action” in this play, hardly a representative melodrama by any definition, merely the boredom of a summer day where, again, Schopenhauer's words resonate throughout the play: “Time is that by virtue of which everything becomes nothingness in our hands and loses all real value.”<sup>684</sup> The day proceeds to night, the fog that rolls in tries to obfuscate truth, but the overemphasis Nathan derides in O'Neill is the same point Strindberg makes (albeit more pithily) and later Beckett will make: we are trapped amongst each other within the boundaries and borders of time. The fog itself becomes here a poetic figuralization of the disclosing of the world; reality is murky, awaiting its revelation – awaiting the lifting of the fog – so that the images of time can hopefully reveal a Christian awakening to

the clearer light. We wait, and wait, for a gap to open up into a pure, freer space. But it never does. We have thrown our lot in with family, lovers, friends, associates to whom we are simultaneously attracted and repelled, but we ultimately “spend time together.” Intimacy leads to shared secrets, most of which we would prefer to forget; but time’s feedback loop is inescapable. As Kurt Eisen puts it, the “multivalent psychological conflicts” throughout this and other of O’Neill’s plays are the author’s attempt to use melodrama as a vehicle to uncover the depth of psychological intricacies through time.<sup>685</sup> As each character hurls spotlight after spotlight on the others’ shortcomings, love and hate, as Strindberg knew, collide, leading to self-effacement and failure. The last line of the play is Mary’s, walking about in a morphine-induced stupor, brushing away the “*cobwebs from her brain*” as the stage directions note, but still cogent enough to say, “That was the winter of my senior year. Then in the spring something happened to me. Yes, I remember. I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so for a time” (828). Time, for O’Neill, is the last word, but it is never the last moment.

According to Terry Eagleton, Samuel Beckett and Theodor Adorno maintain a “compact with failure, which is where for both Jew and Irishman all authenticity must start.”<sup>686</sup> The same for O’Neill. Failure is the proving ground of authenticity; it typifies an American modernism, where the denizens of Harry Hope’s bar in *The Iceman Cometh* aggregate, sharing their egalitarian spirit of what might be loosely termed “we’re all losers, so drop the façade.” And if any character epitomizes the modern American split consciousness it is Tyrone. He has sold his soul to the marketplace. His tirades and hectoring, his repugnant parsimony and sanctimony, his blowhard attitudes to land and family, and his abusiveness to Mary, make him unsympathetic for the first three acts. Yet, the most touching moment is when he listens speechlessly to his son’s recollection about the sea in Act Four. Why does he remain silent? It is, for him, out-of-character. Tyrone – garrulous, an actor in love with his resonant voice, who holds forth on every conceivable topic, a possessor of the Irishman’s gift of gab – says nothing. His silence suggests reflection, envy, and admiration; his son has thrown overboard the greasy pole of success, living a timeless existence only the sea can offer. The sea, with its vistas and contours, its sexuality and violence, and its mockery of human vanity, humbles and elevates simultaneously. A sea voyage is a universal moment of pause, a rhythm of reflection. For the sea, time stops being time as a human endeavor, all punctuality and appointments, and becomes eternal. As Tyrone listens to his youngest son, he could be thinking of his own journey from Ireland to America, carrying the baggage of dreams that are now distant and unrealizable. He could be thinking of his son’s courage – his son on the verge of dying of tuberculosis, willingly living a life that has no truck with the material, the banal, and the self-aggrandizing.

O'Neill's dark descent into the abyss has no equal. His characters must let go their sorrows and yet letting go cannot happen immediately. Time can be the only interpreter for grief. His dramas of mourning enact this dilemma; the solace is primarily in the ritual of remembering and realizing that memory must wrestle with the fog that obscures its view. *Long Day's Journey into Night* is a big, descanted, harking web of analogies, which is why it evokes so effectively the felt anguish of loss. O'Neill's baroque form, richly symbolic, lets the family haunt the work, writing into the lacunae the mundane, as his characters try to peer through the foggy haze in order to make sense of their squandered lives. O'Neill is creating an excursion into the meaning of loss and regret, and the journey is messy, painful, and finally cathartic – though perhaps not in the way Aristotle intended, with a neat and tidy conclusion. Robert Brustein contends that in “power and insight, O'Neill remains unsurpassed among American dramatists, and, of course, it is doubtful if, without him, there would have been an American drama at all.” Perhaps there would have been a less pessimistic-nihilistic American dramatic tradition without O'Neill, for his last two plays set a tone for American modern dramatists that would spread over the next several decades. Brustein calls the last plays “extraordinary dramas of revolt which he pulled out of himself in pain and suffering, a sick and tired man in a shuttered room, unable to bear much light.”<sup>687</sup> O'Neill depicted the clash of sexual urges and demonic desires that, as Schopenhauer claimed, lead the will crashing against other wills, like directionless atoms energized and unconstrained. For O'Neill, Greek tragedy was all about this Schopenhauer-Nietzsche-like unrestrained passion and urges that get mangled under the pressures of the everyday mendacities.



# Chapter 19

## Delusions

“Whoever you are – I have always depended on the kindness of strangers,” Blanche famously says at the end of Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*.<sup>688</sup> Certainly not on the kindness of the state, family, or lovers, for all have abandoned her. Only the compassion of an invisible stranger, not the visible intimates of family, nor the social safety nets of a welfare state, can rescue Blanche from the dustbin. She is led off to an asylum, which at the time was little more than a venal storing house for undesirables. Williams reminds us, in unequivocally political terms, that however much Blanche is hyperbolic and self-involved, society cannot abandon human beings. According to Scott Sandage, “Williams created a rare female icon of failure” and the final line quoted above “could have been snipped directly from Gilded Age begging letters. We understand such characters because they embody our aesthetic of failure, mourning lost souls more than lost fortunes.”<sup>689</sup> Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* warns of the same fate for her disabled daughter, urging her son to care for her at all costs. Amanda is divided between wanting to be the eternal ingénue, concerned mother, southern belle, and successful entrepreneur. And Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* describes her impoverished upbringing along similar lines. These three characters are divided and forced to confront a brutalizing reality that evokes desperate attempts to survive in a world that has little use for aging females.

According to Marc Robinson, Williams’s oscillations between the reverent and irreverent “remind us that Williams’s main concern is aesthetic.”<sup>690</sup> On the contrary, Williams’s plays are archly political-socialist dramas illuminating the conditions of discarded and disposable human beings in capitalism. Williams was intensely aware of how people are tossed in the dust heap to make room for the stronger Darwinians. In a 1943 letter to Audrey Wood, Williams wrote

that “I won’t go into the wretched details but it is like a Chekhov play, only sadder and wilder.”<sup>691</sup> The play is *A Glass Menagerie* (1945, originally titled *The Gentleman Caller*), certainly his most autobiographical, influenced by Chekhov, yet unequivocally political. It takes place in memory, as Amanda’s son Tom reflects back on the abandonment of his mother and sister during the Great Depression. As he says in his opening monologue to the audience, “To begin with, I turn back time, I reverse it to that quaint period, the thirties, when the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind. Their eyes were having their fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy.”<sup>692</sup> The backdrop underscores the play’s social conditions that left millions destitute. The stage directions describe the room as “*one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded centers of lower-class population and are symptomatic of the impulse of this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused mass of automatism*” (3). Amanda’s concern for her daughter, whose helplessness makes her vulnerable to a capitalist society, is the driving focus. Her nostalgia for her ingénue past is puerile; the Mississippi-born Tennessee (John Lanier) Williams (1911–1983) had a tumultuous relationship with his mother’s air of southern aristocracy, which he translates into the play by mocking many of Amanda’s haute-southern belle pretensions. Still, Amanda’s trepidation for her daughter is genuine, and there is nothing obtuse about Laura’s inevitable destitution. After she discovers that Laura has dropped out of secretarial school because of her acute sensitivity and pathological shyness (manifested in her “nervous digestion”), Amanda expresses a politics steeped in Depression-era consciousness and foreboding future:

So what are we going to do the rest of our lives? Stay home and watch the parades go by? Amuse ourselves with the glass menagerie, darling? Eternally play those worn-out phonograph records your father left as a painful reminder of him? We won’t have a business career – we’ve given that up because it gave us nervous digestion! (*Laughs wearily*). What is there left but dependency all our lives? I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren’t prepared to occupy a position. I’ve seen such pitiful cases in the South – barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister’s husband or brother’s wife! – stuck away in some little mousetrap of a room – encouraged by one in-law to visit another – little birdlike women without any nest – eating the crust of humility all their life! (19)

Benjamin Nelson implies a double consciousness when he says that Amanda “lives in two worlds: the pleasant dream of the past, Moon Lake Casino, Blue Mountain, and memory of seventeen gentleman callers in a single day, and the drab and demanding world of the present, with bills to pay, a son who is ‘a poet

with a job in a warehouse,' and a daughter who has refused to accept the harsh reality of her life and has withdrawn into the world of glass figurines she has collected 'till she is like a piece her own glass collection, too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf.'"<sup>693</sup> For all her airs, Amanda is thoroughly aware of the reality facing women like Laura: shy, vulnerable, too sensitive to work, and crushed by a disability that stigmatizes. In the dog-eat-dog world of American capitalism, Laura is an appendage, a fifth wheel, her lame gait unable to fit into the "go-go" whirl of American entrepreneurialism. The "gentleman caller" arriving at the play's end epitomizes the American materialist, with his dream of getting in on the ground of a new industry – television. Amanda "struggles valiantly against the threat of abject poverty," writes Williams biographer Lyle Leverich, and what "binds her and Tom is the tragedy of his sister, Laura, crippled and withdrawn, an image he carries with him after finally he has left home."<sup>694</sup> The gentleman caller, too, has been affected by an economic condition thwarting his ambitions. The inescapable fact of politics casts a shadow over the four characters.

"I write out of love for the South," Williams said: "It once had a way of life that I am just old enough to remember – a culture that had grace, elegance, an inbred culture, not based on money. I write out of regret for that." The south represented for Williams "the war between romanticism and the hostility to it."<sup>695</sup> Williams brings his aging southern belle-romanticism theme to his next great success, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947, originally titled *The Poker Night*). Though he is sympathetic to his central character, Blanche – a woman who has had to endure guilt, shame, death, and the collapse of her plantation home – Williams is too good of a playwright to make his drama a sole polemic for southern aristocracy. The dual consciousness so evident in *A Glass Menagerie* is carried over into this play, described thus by Kenneth Tynan: "In his [Williams's] mental battlefield the real is perpetually at war with the ideal; what is public wrestles with what is private, what drags men down fights with what draws them up. This struggle is allegory," reflecting "a conflict within Williams himself. He cannot bring himself to believe that the flesh and the spirit can be reconciled, or to admit that the highest emotion can spring from the basest source."<sup>696</sup>

The play takes place in New Orleans, a city in the South but hardly characteristic of it. The bustling, pulsating, jazz-rich, and sensual city symbolizes Blanche's brother-in-law and nemesis, Stanley Kowalski. Blanche's romanticism runs up against Stanley's realism and eroticism (famously enacted by Marlon Brando), and both fight for the attention and empathy of Blanche's sister and Stanley's wife, Stella. The duality of Blanche's romantic idealism and attraction to the visceral realism of Stanley is captured by Anne Fleche, who observes that "The play's violence, its baroque images of decadence and lawlessness, promise its audience the thrilling destruction of the aristocratic Southern Poe-esque moth-like neurasthenic female 'Blanche' by the ape-like brutish male from the

American melting-pot.”<sup>697</sup> The conflict is life-and-death, and death itself haunts the play. Desire for Williams was a personal struggle, his sexuality enmeshed in destructive relationships. But more than a personal story, *A Streetcar Named Desire* characterizes the conflicts reminiscent of Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov – the struggle of the old world verses the new, the modern age of aggressiveness and expansion versus antiquity and gentility. Stanley wants to tear down the pretensions of superiority, the highfalutin mask of a dead past. His blunt behavior and “apish” ways revolt Blanche, but like a moth attracted to the flame, she, like her sister, is attracted to his uncompromising confidence. The drama itself captures the dual consciousness of blunt visceral lust versus poetry and art. But for Blanche, the streetcar she rides to her sister’s home takes her from desire to the cemetery. Her last vestige of hope is Mitch, Stanley’s co-worker and sycophant, and her desperate belief in some beauty in the world. “In the face of impermanence and flux,” writes Tom Adler, the one thing guaranteed to endure for Blanche “is art/illusion, into which Blanche increasingly escapes. But such self-theatricalization easily breaks down when confronted by the telltale mirror.”<sup>698</sup>

The eros-thanatos death match between Stanley and Blanche is a dialectical war of consciousnesses embraced by Williams and expressed through the warp of time. Blanche’s past transgressions and her overburdening guilt haunt her throughout the play, building temporarily and relentlessly as she loses the struggle. In her bid to keep Mitch’s interests, she tries to explain her past to him: “I don’t want realism. I want magic! (*Mitch laughs*) Yes, yes, magic! I try to give it to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don’t tell the truth, I tell what ought to be the truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it!” (145). Blanche, like Willy Loman in Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, is unable to relinquish sins hearkening back to painful memories and guilt. The necessity of illusions for Blanche, Amanda, and Laura, writes Mary Ann Corrigan, “doggedly cling to an imaginary vision of what life ought to be, while resolutely ignoring what life is,” which endows them “with a dignity denied those who accommodate themselves to imperfect existence.”<sup>699</sup> Guilt is the underlying motive for Blanche’s breakdown; but a lack of understanding and compassion by others also contributes. Referring to Blanche’s mistreatment of her homosexual husband, Arthur Ganz said that those who crucify “can never be guiltless. Kowalski, although an avenger, is as guilty of crucifying Blanche as she is of crucifying her husband. For Blanche, who has lost the plantation Belle Reve, the beautiful dream of a life of gracious gentility, is an exile like the homosexual, her tormentor, the apeline Kowalski [...] is from another brutal, male torturer of a lonely spirit.”<sup>700</sup> Deliberate cruelty begets more deliberate cruelty, and Blanche’s homelessness is made stark and bold by Williams’s political viewpoint. She is in exile spiritually and literally, her back to the wall with only her wits and charm to save her. She teaches English, which Stanley says he was “never very

good at.” Literature, art, poetry are useless in a materialistic society. And Blanche’s sensitivity – her need to cover naked light bulbs – lacks the functional wheel that turns a capitalistic worldview. Blanche, like Laura, will be discarded like rubbish, a useless cog in the wheel of material progress.

If Williams is moving from delusion’s dominance in *The Glass Menagerie*, to an equal match between delusion and reality in *Streetcar* (Stanley versus Blanche), reality now gains the upper hand in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). We certainly encounter a dual consciousness within the character of Brick, where past guilt and present dissatisfaction collide. His friend, Skipper, has committed suicide after his homosexuality is revealed by Brick’s wife, Maggie, and the allegation casts its net over Brick as well. Brick’s alleged homosexuality instigated several versions of the play (Williams and the censors were never in sync about this) and this uncertainty has occupied many scholarly debates. David Savran has written that Williams’s “homosexuality is the site of manifold contradictions, articulated by the unstable and fluid difference between secrecy and disclosure, between his ability to write about sexual desire,” and “his inability to speak about it openly.” Instead, “Williams’s homosexuality is endlessly refracted in his work: translated, reflected, and transposed.”<sup>701</sup> Michael Paller offers a convincing argument that in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* it is the “*thought* of being a homosexual – finally more important than whether or not Brick actually is gay.” Brick’s tantrums and vitriolic denials “don’t convincingly suggest Brick is *not* gay.” What he fears most is “being perceived as gay, and while this fear of what others think may be a projection of his own fears, the more important point would be not his shame at being gay, *but his shame at denying it*.”<sup>702</sup> William James’s clash between the social and the personal self is evident in Brick, whose ambivalence and permanent unsteadiness denies him the strength to be the central figure – to hold center stage – in the play. His father, Big Daddy, a blustering egomaniac cut from the same cloth as James Tyrone in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, is one of Williams’s great characters and a challenge to any actor. So, too, is Maggie the Cat, whose name adorns the title and who offers the most sobering thrust of reality in any of Williams’s plays.

Mendacity is the repetitive motif of the play: it is both condemned and exalted. It is the lies we live with, the delusions that sustain us against the little cuts and assaults to our well-being. Rousseau called it the “invincible shame,” but Williams (and Ibsen) knew better – the “life-lie” can be the life-blood. Like Blanche, Brick wants to live in “magic” – but for him it is the drowning “click” he consumes from the appropriate amount of liquor. Big Daddy condemns mendacity, too, but he is a product of lies all around him, where everyone knows he is dying except him. It is Maggie who ultimately has the last word on mendacity. In an undated letter to director Elia Kazan, Williams wrote about his rewrites for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, urging the director to concentrate “on the character of Margaret” because she is “always crouched at the feet of the

rich and lucky with the smile of a beggar, and the claws of a cat.”<sup>703</sup> Maggie knows her past, and knows where her bread is buttered. Brick can run on football fields and play endless games in his romantic imagination while breaking his ankle. He can throw imaginary balls to Skipper and toy with shadows in his private, liquor-soaked Platonic cave, but for Maggie the world is unambiguous. As she says to Brick, “Always had to suck up to people I couldn’t stand because they had money and I was poor as Job’s turkey. You don’t know what that’s like. Well, I’ll tell you, it’s like you would feel a thousand miles away from Echo Spring! – And had to get back to it on that broken ankle ... without a crutch!”<sup>704</sup>

Maggie understands what Amanda and Blanche do likewise: that comely looks are transitory, fleeting, and can only carry a woman in a male dominated world up to a point. Unless she can prove to Big Daddy that she can match the veritable baby-making machine of her in-laws, Sister Woman Mae and Brother Man Gooper, Big Daddy will have no use for propping up a beloved but besotted son and thus cut him (and Maggie with it) out of his will. So she bluffs, like any good poker player, and claims pregnancy when she is in fact not (yet). For Maggie, mendacity is not a linguistic game of self-mockery, deceit in the name of holy truth or sanctimonious sentiment; rather, it is for her a survival tool, the strategic weapon in capitalism’s take-no-prisoners life. Maggie’s bluff is *Realpolitik*, the actions of, what I have written elsewhere, a “hardened realist who knows that time is against her.”<sup>705</sup> If Biff’s indeterminacy and incompleteness reflects an ambivalent sexuality, if Big Daddy is atomized and dispersed by the pretenses of those around him, Maggie is the opposite: enriched by a certainty that is determined to live.

“In all his work,” John Gassner writes, “Williams revealed himself a poet of the theatre absorbed in the problems of living an abundant emotional life.”<sup>706</sup> The emotional excess is pitted against a world that has little use for it; emotions and compassion cannot purchase, manufacture, or advance technology; the emotional life is, as Blanche would say, only “magic and poetry.” Williams’s politics is socialism without fiduciary data; instead, he is supportive of the underdog, the sensitive, the overly poetic, and the lyrical who cannot survive under capitalism. His later plays, while rarely produced, still retain the bruising emotional conflicts of the discarded individual in capitalism’s grinding maw. The plays retreat from realism in many respects, sometimes straining for poetic nuance beyond his artistic reach. But he never lost his power to convey suffering, delusion, disillusion, and his most poignant theme – loneliness – always with compassion and empathy. In Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman pleads with his boss to keep him employed, saying, “You can’t eat the orange and throw away the peel.” For Williams, this image underscores his characters driven to survive under hostile circumstances.

# Chapter 20

## Dreams

If, as Kurt Eisen observes, Eugene O'Neill's vision is his "ringing dissent amid the postwar optimism in his own country,"<sup>707</sup> then Arthur Miller picks up the mantle of dissenter in every phase of his dramaturgy. The post-World War II infatuation with success was brimming with optimism, but underlying it was a deep feeling of residual fear from the Great Depression. Miller's plays, at least his early successes *All My Sons* (1947) and *The Death of a Salesman* (1949), reflect this trepidation. Kenneth Tynan writes that what drives Miller is "a sleepless social conscience." Having "crossed the thirties to the fifties, while skipping the awkward forties," Miller "wants art to reflect society."<sup>708</sup> The greed in *All My Sons* derives from a family that had experienced the Depression, and though the play, according to Enoch Brater, "appeared at the very moment when the country, victorious in war after defeating fascism in Europe and imperialism in Japan, was 'feeling good about itself,'" Miller's drama "refused to let its audience forget the ugly side of recent events it seemed all too willing 'to sweep under the rug.'"<sup>709</sup> *All My Sons* deals with a family tainted by the blood of World War II airmen killed in planes made by the protagonist's factory's defective parts, the fact of which the protagonist knew all along but still produced. In this and many of his plays, double consciousness derives from what Brenda Murphy calls Miller's "conflict between the individual's subjective experience and the individual's social responsibility."<sup>710</sup>

Miller, influenced by Ibsen, shared with him an upbringing in a family experiencing financial hardship, his father having lost everything to the 1929 Crash. Also influenced by Clifford Odets, he took the helm as America's liberal dramatist and held it for as long as the ride would last. He was a byproduct of the "up-against-it" 1930s whose inhabitants conveyed the rebellion against injustice and the restoration of human dignity. In a world so completely organized

around and dominated by power and potency, Miller observed a society no longer susceptible to understanding values of balance, fairness, and autonomy. Miller's America is comprehensible in terms of success, avarice, and selfishness, yet incorporates the social narratives that run up against rupture, division, and alienation. As a consequence, morality became the forgotten integer in the American equation. The American credo of individualism and selfishness, articulated in novels such as Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* or F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (especially in the brutality and aloof power of Tom Buchanan), informs Miller's condemnation of capitalist rapacity.

Miller's politics parallel the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács, who was hostile to formalism and speculative philosophy. But Miller's Marxism added a unique blend of promethean Romanticism to the uncompromising historical determinism. Miller's attraction to Marxism provided an explanation of how the world works through the economic analysis of social class relations and the mechanization of the human being. According to Marx, "by the subordination of man to the machine or by the extreme division of labour" people "are effaced by their labour; [...] the pendulum of the clock has become as accurate a measure of the relative activity of two workers as it is of the speed of two locomotives. Therefore, we should not say that one man's hour is worth another man's hour, but rather that one man during an hour is worth just as much as another man during an hour. Time is everything, man is nothing; he is, at the most, time's carcass."<sup>711</sup> Lukács observes along similar lines that in this environment "where time is transformed into abstract, exactly measurable, physical space, an environment at once the cause and effect of the scientifically and mechanically fragmented and specialised production of the object of labour, the subjects of labour must likewise be rationally fragmented."<sup>712</sup>

Congeries of fragmentation, business orientation, contradictions, and time epitomize Miller's most popular play, *Death of a Salesman*. "The first image that occurred to me," he wrote describing the play's germination, "was an enormous face the height of the proscenium arch which would appear and then open up, and we would see the inside of a man's head." *The Inside of His Head* was the original title, Miller said, within which "was a mass of contradictions."<sup>713</sup> These contradictions, like Du Bois's double consciousness, characterize the central character Willy Loman's dilemma: the conflict between his conscious awareness of his failures and the idealistic and unrelenting quest for success. *Death of a Salesmen* deals in public persona and the private world of his familial bonds; in the case of America the family, Miller sees these two entities as commingled with house and finance, business and personal relationships. Neither marriage ("until death do us part") nor mortgages (the root "mort" implying a pledge that "dies" when paid in full or defaulted) is without risk.

Matthew Roudané posits that Willy Loman "is a figure savagely divided against himself." At all costs, Roudané says, "Willy must leave his thumbprint



on the world. He must constantly name and rename himself. Forever doomed to linger on the margins, Willy locates his essential self within the epicenter of the business world."<sup>714</sup> His "essential self," as James might say, is materially, socially, and spiritually multi-directional, geared towards the big sale, humbled by the intimacy of family, and pulled, like Marx's locomotive, in multiple directions. According to John Gassner the play's chief characteristics "are engaged by the pathos of a man who gave all his life to the business only to be thrown on the scrap-heap, a householder whose pattern of life was interwoven with installment plans with which he could hardly catch up, a doting father disappointed in his children, and an American *naïf* bemused by the worship of uncreative success and hollow assumptions that 'personality' is the *summum bonum*."<sup>715</sup> Willy hurls himself through the play at reckless speed, moving from past to present at a tempo certain to grind him to exhaustion. He will, like Blanche, end up on the scrap-heap, but not before he lunges after his material and spiritual quests in much the same way as Melville's Ahab in *Moby Dick* and Hemingway's Old Man in *The Old Man and the Sea*, each looking for the "big fish." Willy, Ahab, and the Old Man are doomed in their larger-than-life needs, yet we admire them for their oversized desire and headlong grab for their symbolic goals. It is as if in Willy all of James's divided selves are collected together for one big push, one gigantic swipe at the brass ring. Miller valorizes his protagonist, saying, "Like any traveling man," Willy had "a kind of intrepid valor that withstood the inevitable putdowns, the scoreless attempts to sell." Salesmen, Miller explains, "lived like artists, like actors whose product is first of all themselves, forever imagining triumphs in a world that either ignores them or denies their presence altogether. But just often enough to keep the game going one of them makes it and swings to the moon on a thread of dreams unwinding out of himself."<sup>716</sup>

Indeed, Willy Loman is "swinging" or *traveling*, a character literally moving breathlessly across the stage towards an imagined triumph, hurling back and forth through time and memory, brought down to earth by the mundane and struggling to rise like the phoenix from the ashes. Willy clings to his dreams in much the same way as Brecht's Mother Courage: both are in "sales & marketing," not only as professionals, but as self-identity. Willy's suitcase of sundry items (whatever they are) is similar to Courage's wagon filled with bric-a-brac, as well as to O'Neill's protagonist Hickey and his "selling" redemption: they sell everything and anything; they are in the business of sales and whatever cannot be nailed down is fair game for profit. Their emotional conditions are subject to every roller-coaster ride, and their commitment to capitalism is unbending and unbowed. They cling pathetically yet admirably to their devotion: marketing is the means, selling is all. Miller, O'Neill, and Brecht capture the vast chasm between the dream and the achievement, the desire and the accomplishment, that is part and parcel of capitalism. We have no idea

what Willy sells, making him in this sense more an icon (in the tradition of expressionism) than a flesh and blood person. Yet the “ideology of society and of the family,” writes Walter Davis, “are one and inseparable,” because the “knife cuts both ways”; the subject of the play “is neither the familial unconscious nor the social unconscious but their complicity.”<sup>717</sup> Miller’s aim was to merge the social drama (expressionist icon) and the intimate personal drama of realism; the former defined his politics, but the latter earmarked his dramaturgical skills through human communication. Miller’s biographer Christopher Bigsby argues that *Death of a Salesman* straddles the line between tragedy and social drama, because that “Willy has so completely internalized the values of his society that he judges himself by standards rooted in social myths rather than necessities gives a clue to the sense of the tragic that Miller and others have seen in the play,” but the play also lays “before America the corpse of a true believer” and to that degree “it is a social play.”<sup>718</sup>

The play is as American as Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. According to Giles Gunn, the problems that afflict Ahab in *Moby Dick* are “those of a latter-day Puritan who inherits a system of belief that can no longer answer or evade the questions he puts to it but who cannot escape the tyranny of the system itself.” Willy, too, inherits a belief in the American success system that can no longer sustain him, nor respond adequately to his inquiry, yet he is incapable of escaping it. Ahab, according to Gunn, does not experience his circumstances this way; instead he experiences his predicament “as a desire to determine what lies behind the pasteboard mask of appearance that has been shoved so brutally in his face. But this desire is endlessly frustrated because of the impenetrability of the mask whose nearness only compounds the outrage.”<sup>719</sup> So, too, Willy: he races through the play as if on an express train, stopping to catch a glimpse of his life’s meaning only to be grabbed by the moving train and hurled into another situation. He wants, like Ahab, to see beneath the illusion. His double consciousness is his past and his present: each moment intrudes on the other; each event collides with the other as he tries to see what lies beneath the pasteboard mask – the American Dream – that has been shoved so brutally in his face. When Ahab says in *Moby Dick* “That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate,” he, like Willy, is lured to his death not so much by vengeance (though there’s plenty of that) but more importantly by an urge to unpack the meaning of existence, to get at the mocking “inscrutable thing” that denies life its meaningfulness. Both Ahab and Willy share the misguided passion for monotheism, in Willy’s case the singular deity of manna.

Willy also shares the characteristics of King Lear (and much has been made of this comparison in trying to define the play as “modern” tragedy). Lear seeks authenticity in love through verbal acknowledgment, Willy seeks the true nature of business acumen; both misfire in their personal and professional goals because they fail to observe that appearances or phenomena are not necessarily

the same as inner reality or the thing-in-itself. Both inhabit purgatory, a limbo condition where what they once thought was true is now false, putting their notions of truth in elusive ambivalence. G. Wilson Knight's description of Lear can suffice for Willy: Lear's "purgatory," Knight says, is "to be a purgatory of the mind, of madness. Lear has trained himself to think he cannot be wrong: he finds he is wrong. He has fed his heart on sentimental knowledge of his children's love: he finds their love is not sentimental. There is now a gaping dualism in his mind, drawn asunder by incongruities, and he endures madness."<sup>720</sup> Willy, likewise, endures a gaping dualism between his past beliefs and his present circumstances, all of which provoke a nexus of anguish and madness.

In the climactic scene of *Death of a Salesman*, Biff Loman confronts his father's attempts at suicide by producing a rubber hose he found in the basement. Biff, the wayward son, burdened with his own disappointment and failure, attempts to tear away the "pasteboard mask" of illusions, the "inscrutable thing" that has gripped and burdened the Loman family, the gaping dualism of reality and dreams. Biff realizes what Fred Ribkoff calls his "identity crisis," experiencing the epiphany of his wasted life and his distorted relationship to his father.<sup>721</sup> His brother, Happy, clings to his dream, as does Willy, but Biff relentlessly seeks to redeem them through the singular truth of their insignificance.

BIFF (*to Happy*): The man doesn't know who we are! The man is gonna know!  
                                   (*to Willy*). We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house.

HAPPY: We always told the truth!

BIFF: (turning on him): You big blow, are you the assistant buyer?  
You're one of two assistants to the assistant, aren't you?

HAPPY: Well, I'm practically –

BIFF: You're practically full of it! We all are. And I'm through with it.  
(*to Willy*): Now hear this, Willy, this is me.

WILLY: I know you!<sup>722</sup>

To “know” is to uncover the authentic self, to crystallize the “real thing” in contrast to self-delusion. Biff, like a preacher sermonizing, is seeking salvation for himself and his father by literally grabbing his father by the scruff of the neck and pouring truth down his throat. Yet, like O’Neill, the delusion and the real teeter on both sides of the double consciousness, and Willy is unable (or unwilling) to release the tenacious hold of his past and the complicit dream of his imagination. Willy Loman subscribes to what Van Wyck Brooks called in 1915 the American coming-of-age belief that “the getting of a living is not necessarily incidental to some higher and more disinterested end, but that it is the prime and central end in things.”<sup>723</sup> The dream of success and the reality of failure wrestle in Willy’s inner life, making him unable to accept his son’s “dollar-an-hour” description of him. As Miller says, Willy is functioning in a double

consciousness of “two logics” – past and present – which “often collide.” He is, Miller explains, “literally at that terrible moment when the voice of the past is no longer distant but quite as loud as the voice of the present,” adding that “There is no flashback in this play but only a mobile concurrency of past and present, and this, again, because in his desperation to justify his life Willy Loman has destroyed the boundaries between now and then.”<sup>724</sup> When Biff speaks to his father about working in the “open air,” unfettered with concerns of success, fame, and money, Willy dismissed this because it is too simple and unidirectional – he cannot reconcile it to his multiple consciousness. The boundaries between past and present coningle and the unreconciled crisis in his psyche is enflamed. For Willy no single self can emerge because there is no one defining feature, however clearly Biff states it, that can encompass him. His desire for Whitman-like multitudes, to make an imprint in and on the world, family, friends, and business, weighs heavily on his vulnerable state of mind. Given Willy’s consciousnesses – the raging voices he hears from the present and the past, especially from his imaginary brother, Ben – make Biff’s remarks incomprehensible to him. Biff says,

I’m not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them! I’m one dollar an hour, Willy! I tried seven states and couldn’t raise it. A buck an hour! Do you gather my meaning? I’m not bringing home any prizes any more, and you’re going to stop waiting for me to bring them home! (132).

Biff’s synecdoche – “a buck an hour” – is gibberish to Willy because for him it diminishes the dream. Willy is a dreamer, and like Ahab dreamers cannot accept the mundane. This is his undoing and his glory: he wants more than life has dealt, but is unable to find or grab the elusive “more.” So he runs to and fro, grabbing snatches of the past and the present. Willy is incapable of stopping because he is possessed by two warring consciousnesses whispering in each ear. Starbuck’s haunting words in Melville’s *Moby Dick*, “let Ahab beware Ahab; beware of thyself, old man,”<sup>725</sup> echo throughout this play, as if to say “Willy beware Willy.” His suicide is motivated by his obsession with success that ignites our admiration and fear. Willy, writes Christopher Bigsby, “dies in the machine that has carried him daily deeper into despair and yet which is the ambiguous symbol of his culture, on the move into the future yet itself always in thrall to entropy.”<sup>726</sup> The play is perpetual motion, a time machine hurtling through the stage space with an unstoppable force. Like Ahab, Willy’s course is set from his entrance onstage, and we witness in horror the inevitable. For Willy, memories of his infidelity in the Boston hotel room, which instigates Biff’s downfall, survive in the unsteadiness of language – his questions seeking answers only to retreat into his cocoon when anything said might threaten him.

Like O'Neill's barflies in *The Iceman Cometh*, or Amanda and Blanche's gloriously romantic past, the harsh realities of Willy's status as a salesman, father, husband, and in James's words, social self, can never measure up to the expectations he sets. Forever disappointed, forever reaching for something unattainable, his tragedy lies in his admirable yet fruitless strivings.

Miller's men – Willy, John Procter in *The Crucible*, and Eddie Carbone in *A View from the Bridge* – are wrapped into the masculine aura of likability, success, and Protestant-Jewish work ethos. They might be sexually dishonest, philandering after forbidden fruits – but in work they are all transparency and decency. Arthur Miller wrote that “In one sense a play is a species of jurisprudence, and some part of it must take the advocate's role, something else must act in defense, and the entirety must engage the Law.”<sup>727</sup> We are audiences in judgment. Miller, the unrelenting moralist, is like Ibsen weighing in on society's shortcomings and highlighting its injustices. Greek tragedy was still on Miller's mind when he set out to create *A View from the Bridge*. Originally a one-act (1955), he extended the play into a two-act drama replete with chorus in the guise of the common-people's lawyer Alfieri. The play is also a rejoinder to Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (1954) – Kazan beatifying the informer and Miller demonizing him. But both investigate the idea of betrayal – of friendships, loyalties, and politics.

The divided self personifies Eddie Carbone. A hard-working Italian long-shoreman in Brooklyn's Red Hook working-class neighborhood, Eddie lives by a strict code of honor. “The mind of Eddie Carbone,” Miller says (as if echoing James), “is not comprehensible apart from its relation to his neighborhood, his fellow workers, his social situation. His self-esteem depends upon their estimate of him, and his value is created largely by his fidelity to the code of his culture.”<sup>728</sup> He nobly adopts his niece Catherine, his wife's sister's daughter, and works arduously to raise her so that she might, in the common traditions of the American Dream, rise above her proletarian environment. He takes his wife's cousins into his home, too, hiding them as illegal immigrants. His divided self pits his moral code derived from his surroundings against his sexual desires; his lust for his niece becomes an irreconcilable consciousness.

Miller's later works, often Jewish-family themes,<sup>729</sup> fell out of favor, as American theatre and drama moved towards the direction of the absurd rather than the well-made play style Miller excelled at. Miller's dialogue is also occasionally flawed by what Tom Driver calls “sententiousness.”<sup>730</sup> Unlike Williams, whose prose sings with the rhythm of southern lilt, Miller's quotidian language can seem pedestrian. He was in many ways a writer of the 1930s, and like Clifford Odets, tends to be willfully nostalgic for the alienated working class. His plays, like Odets, Williams, and even to some extent Tony Kushner's, beg the question why socialism failed to adhere in America despite the enormous popularity of these dramatists. Indeed, the core of America's great playwrights

(Miller, Williams, O'Neill, Hellman, Hansberry, Kushner) are liberal-socialists of one stripe or another, their works having been extolled throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Yet for each, the dignity of labor is exemplified by the individual, not the collective; one man or woman standing up to the bosses and not a union working simultaneously. Some of this has to do with the legacy of slavery, a "collectivist" tradition in America more reviled (as it should be) than exemplary. The ideology of motion – O'Neill's sea journeys, Williams's intransient figures, Miller's egocentric and narcissistic characters – also fails to square with the sublimation of the self needed for socialism to work. American exceptionalism finds its way into the work of these playwrights, too, overcoming just enough of their socialist leanings to make their social democracy a brand apart from European models. Finally, Miller's urbanism and Williams's southern roots tilt towards regionalism rather than class divisions. Still, Miller's emphasis on the family unit, however narrowly construed (heterosexual, male-dominated, and lower middle class), is dynamically interwoven into the economic fabric. Tony Kushner wrote that in "his greatest play," *Death of a Salesman*, "it is impossible to avoid thinking about economics – money – in any attempt to render coherent the human tragedy unfolding before you." Throughout his career, "He never wanted us to forget that without economic justice, the concept of social justice is an absurdity and, worse, a lie."<sup>731</sup>

# Chapter 21

## Gender

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *A Scarlett Letter* (1850), the protagonist Hester Prynne leaves prison early in the novel wearing the stigma (the mark of an adulterer) "so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom. It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself."<sup>732</sup> The same could be said for Lillian Hellman's play, *The Children's Hour*, where the notion of a stigma has the power to divide one's personal self from the social self. "This play," Lillian Hellman recalled Lee Shubert saying as they watched a rehearsal of *The Children's Hour*, "could land us all in jail."<sup>733</sup> The play, which concerns the love that dare not speak its name, was banned in Boston and elsewhere. Hellman (1906–1984) wrote eight plays and three adaptations, but none arguably achieved the fame and notoriety of her first, *The Children's Hour* (1934). Like Williams, she was a product of the south. But her most significant influence was her intimate relationship with Dashiell Hammett, the detective novelist, who instilled in her a progressive social consciousness. Both were influenced by the Communist Party and the Popular Front campaigns of the 1930s, which provided resources and opportunities for writers and artists through organizations such as the Federal Writers Project. This led, in turn, to an ascendancy of literary modernism and liberalism of the 1940s and early 1950s, at which point the movement was summarily crushed by the McCarthy Army Congressional hearings that sought to "root out" communists from every corner of the nation. Hellman's progressivism informs *The Children's Hour*, giving it its heft despite its melodramatic and somewhat formulaic structure. While tame by today's standards, it was at its time an explosive drama about the persecution of homosexuality.<sup>734</sup>

The theme of *The Children's Hour* is “character assassination,” writes Katherine Lederer, the damage “done in our world by so-called ‘good’ people, through self-righteous judgment, selfishness, blindness to their own weaknesses.”<sup>735</sup> It is loosely based on an Edinburgh legal case about a boarding school in 1810 from a book by William Roughead. In the play a child, Mary, a compulsive liar, calls into question the relationship between Karen and Martha, two school teachers accused of living together as lovers, and proceeds to blackmail them. The lie infects the community, terminates the relationship between Karen and her fiancé Joe, and forces Martha and Karen to confront each other with the likelihood that Mary’s accusation might be true. The accusation is the pivotal event of the play, evoking a “moral universe,” to borrow Hellman’s biographer Carol Royllson’s term, that is filled with “value-laden vocabulary.”<sup>736</sup> Characters employ the phrase “bad” repeatedly, suggesting the ethical conundrum of homosexuality in the provincial Midwestern town of Lancet during the 1930s. “Good” and “bad” are the dual consciousness of this drama, pulling the two protagonists, Martha and Karen, in opposite directions. In the climactic scene, Joe and Karen have broken off their engagement, leaving his empty seat at the dinner table as Martha prepares the meal. When Karen suggests that they leave and seek a new life elsewhere, Martha’s rebuttal is unequivocal.

KAREN:     (*As a child would say*) Isn’t there anywhere to go?

MARTHA:   No. There’ll never be any place for us to go. We’re bad people. We’ll sit. We’ll be sitting the rest of our lives wondering what’s happened to us. You think this scene is strange? Well, get used to it; we’ll be here for a long time.<sup>737</sup>

This sense of remaking oneself is a key constituency of American modernism. The expectations that guide American orientation to the future can unleash possibilities of breaking free from the past and holding forth the promise of a new beginning. The immigrant experience is rooted in this ability to remake oneself. Martha and Karen are split between wanting to belong to a society where their dreams of teaching at their all-girls school can make a strong social contribution, and, given the stigma they now endure, wanting to remake themselves. The tension in the play is undoubtedly between bigotry and open-mindedness, but there is also a complex tension that is endemic to American modernism: the strict adherence to the past and to the Word, and the open road of modernism with its freer assumptions. For Karen and Martha, teaching creates a continuity; the school represents their rooted presence and social meaningfulness. By contrast, change, evolution, and reconfiguration are Karen’s gut-level response – “let’s get-up-and-go” – that is indelibly American. The pathos of this melodrama lies in the inability of Martha to jettison the



stigma internally. Her suicide is a way to end the play, instigated by the cruel insouciance of small-town America.

Like Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the sexual ambiguity in the play reflects the McCarthy-era repression. Though written in the 1930s, *Children's Hour* anticipates the overbearing 1950s, with its stigmatization, fear-mongering, and provincial bigotry. Martha's final, wavering revelation to Karen – "I love you that way – maybe the way they said I love you. I don't know" (71) – leaves room for considerable ambiguity. Interpretations abound – either Martha desires Karen, or she is pressured into thinking so by society;<sup>738</sup> either way, Hellman is aware of the divided self in the American psyche. The "truth" of their sexuality is, more importantly, secondary, because their goal of a girl's school supersedes any other desire. What is destroyed is not merely a relationship (which is bad enough) but also a vision. The "truth" of their personal relationship becomes the only truth for the townspeople, and in this way Hellman is condemning American narrow provincialism and bigotry as foolish *and indelibly un-American*. In *The Meaning of Truth*, William James articulates a core American philosophy when he writes that "The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It becomes true, is *made* true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its veri-*fication*. Its validity is the process of its valid-*ation*." The naming of "lesbian" upon Martha and Karen is a twofold *experience*: it is a stigmatizing process and an inner desire. The townsfolk force their singular "truth" upon everything else, even if its validation is questionable, thereby stigmatizing rather than incorporating Jamesian "truth" as flexible and contingent. The actual "truth" is a fungible entity undulating back and forth; Martha's and Karen's sexuality is not paramount to their lives. "Experience," James notes, "is a process that continually gives us new material to digest,"<sup>739</sup> yet the town fails to recognize this. The school is not merely their profession, it is their joint venture, communal contribution, and life's work, indelibly linked to their self-awareness as much as, if not more so, than their sexuality. According to Henry Steele Commager, "James believed, passionately, that truth was not something that was found, once and for all, but was forever in the making, that it was not single and absolute but plural and contingent."<sup>740</sup> Hellman, too, rebels against the fixed notion of Martha and Karen, arguing instead that their relationship and lives are in the American spirit of malleability. For Martha and Karen, the "truth" is an amorphous condition, but by virtue of their desire to please society they are condemned to abide by its superficial judgment. What is violated in this play is the basic human right to pursue the "American dream" – in this instance an altruistic contribution to the community. The "truth" is Martha and Karen's desire to build a first-class all-girls' school; everything else can and should be ambiguous, because everything else is secondary. Their sexuality is not only out

of bounds, it is for Hellman also profoundly anti-American; like James's Pragmatism, the divided selves must operate in a fluid baseline, otherwise they will atrophy. John Patrick Diggins's description of James could serve for Hellman as well; consciousness for James, Diggins says, "was not an entity or substance or a condition suggesting a final state of knowing, but rather a process or 'stream,' James's liquid metaphor implying a Whitmanesque continuous becoming, where each flowing moment of consciousness supersedes that which preceded it."<sup>741</sup> To interrupt this flow is to annul human consciousness. The child's gaseous blathering and community's intrusiveness is for Hellman heinous not merely for its homophobia, but because of its profound antithesis to the "American experience." The play highlights bigotry as an obstacle not merely to freedom but to human consciousness.

# Chapter 22

## Race

In a letter to her mother, Lorraine Hansberry (1930–1965) wrote about the opening of her play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959): “Mama, it is a play that tells the truth about people, Negroes and life and I think it will help a lot of people to understand how we are just as complicated as they are – and just as mixed up – but above all, that we have among our miserable and downtrodden ranks – people who are the very essence of human dignity. That is what, after all the laughter and tears, the play is supposed to say.”<sup>742</sup> What is “mixed up” in this play is the complexity of social and personal selves, informed by the way bigotry infects the thought-processes of sensitive, bright, dignified, diligent, and well-intentioned people. One of the play’s protagonists, Walter Lee, says as much at the end when he tries to explain to his family why he was fooled by a scamming Willy Harris to purchase a liquor store (notice, too, Hansberry’s socialist leanings in the character’s description of haves and have-nots):

Mama, you know it’s all divided up. Life is. Sure enough. Between the takers and the “tooken.” (*Laughs*) I’ve figured it out finally. (*He looks around at them*) Yeah. Some of us always getting “tooken.” (*He laughs*) People like Willy Harris, they don’t never get “tooken.” And you know why the rest of us do? ‘Cause we all mixed up. Mixed up bad. We get to looking ’round for the right and the wrong; and we worry about it and cry about it and stay up nights trying to figure out ’bout the wrong and the right of things all the time ... And all the time, man, them takers is out there operating, just taking and taking.<sup>743</sup>

*A Raisin in the Sun*’s opening on Broadway became a cultural event, the demarcation of a black female dramatist whose works rose to the pinnacle of American modern drama. *A Raisin in the Sun* (its title derived from a Langston

Hughes poem) was hardly the first black drama in America, but it had the largest impact up to that time. It was, in many respects, what *Children's Hour* was to the gay and lesbian community; a portrait of the Younger family that captures the nuances and subtleties of black urban life during the last throes of legalized segregation, where opportunities were limited and advancement out of poverty narrowly construed. It is, however, not merely the factual transcription of black culture and society that makes Hansberry a profound playwright, but also her interpretation and penetration of segregation's veil of deception and hypocrisy that erodes one's confidence in humanity.

Hansberry was, like other modern American dramatists, influenced by the Popular Front movements of the 1930s. She was also at a crossroad between writers of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s, who tended to write for white audiences, and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which was inclined towards radicalism and black liberation. She was in line with social realists like James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Gwendolyn Brooks, who, according to Stacy I. Morgan, tended "to portray a national landscape littered with irreparably fractured American dreams." While these authors urged "American masses toward liberation through a strategic use of Marxist-inflected, exhortatory oratorical language," African Americans were also "deeply skeptical of the power of any social gospel to redeem the American scene, even leftist visions with which they were themselves largely sympathetic."<sup>744</sup> Hansberry's plays often extol the virtues of Marxism while simultaneously demonstrating that racism can operate apart from economics, carrying its own baggage.

The Younger family, comprising mother Lena, son Walter Lee, his wife Ruth, sister Beneatha, and Walter and Ruth's son, are awaiting a ten thousand dollar life insurance check from the now-deceased father. Like *A Death of a Salesman*, the insurance check is the play's catalyst. Beneatha wants to use the money for medical school; Walter for a liquor store; Mama for a new home; and Ruth, pregnant with another child, wants to relieve the economic pressures on the household. Each vies to obtain Mama's approval regarding the inheritance. Ultimately the play deals with the structural mobility of African Americans who endured centuries of slavery and then segregation. The American apartheid system, made into law in 1896 by the Supreme Court statute's "separate but equal," restricted opportunity. Walter Lee, like his father, is a limousine driver, implying constant motion; yet ironically he cannot *move* into designated areas. Walter Lee's "vision" makes this clear to his mother (note the images of motion):

(*Quietly*) Sometimes it's like I can see the future stretched out in front of me – just plain as day. The future, Mama. Hanging over there at the edge of my days. Just waiting for me – a big, looming, blank space – full of nothing. Just waiting for me. (*Pause*) Mama – sometimes when I'm downtown and I pass them cool,

quiet-looking restaurants where them white boys are sitting back and talking 'bout things ... sitting there turning deals worth millions of dollars ... (60)

Walter is a product of the “wanting it all” theme in James’s multiple selves: fatherhood, career, success, and the fruits of a post-war American boom. Lillian Hellman wrote that World War II “was the best thing that happened to this country” because the war “did what the New Deal never really accomplished – carried us fully out of the Great Depression, and restored us to the boom-expansiveness of our Gilded Age.” During the post-war era of late the 1940s and into the 1950s, America “stretched and rearranged itself – blacks moved North to new jobs, [and] women went into the work market.”<sup>745</sup> But as African Americans moved north in what was to become the “Great Migration” to cities like Chicago, New York, Detroit, or Pittsburgh (the last astutely delineated by August Wilson), the expectations of work and prosperity were slammed shut by discrimination. The so-called better life up north was hardly better; discrimination knew no boundary as blacks were ghettoized into designated urban regions. The condition created a dual set of choices: fight to join the white middle class or accept separation and profit amongst the group. As Anne Cheney observes, *Raisin* “addresses the sensitive question of to what extent people, in liberating themselves from the burdens of discrimination, should aspire to a white middle-class way of life.”<sup>746</sup>

Walter Lee Younger is divided within himself and is cut from a similar cloth as Willy Loman and other characters seeking the American dream. Like Willy, Walter Lee suffers delusions resulting from his hubris – his veil of self-deception. Like a Greek tragic hero, he boasts of owning a liquor store as his ticket out of poverty, but his pride in ownership overwhelms his street savvy; he is easily duped into giving his cash away to con artists who aggressively bolster his ego while raiding his pockets. Walter Lee is divided between his entrapment at home and the desire to be literally a mover-and-shaker in the ebb and flow of money. His mother’s religious faith and enduring spirit are insufficient for him; he is a modern American pragmatist, where, according to Bruce Kuklick, “pragmatic epistemology was dynamic and interactive.” His mother’s faith in spiritual uplift or his sister’s faith in education are of no use to the “dynamic and interactive” Walter Lee; “consciousness was not a thing for pragmatists,” Kuklick says, “it was a function.”<sup>747</sup> While Mama “come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers” (123), Walter Lee is a product of a northern, urban, and essentially modern sensibility, where “doing” trumps “feeling” and life is money.

MAMA: (*Quietly*) Oh – (*Very quietly*) so now it’s life. Money is life. Once upon a time freedom used to be life – now it’s money. I guess the world really do change.

WALTER LEE: No – it was always money, Mama. We just didn’t know about it (61).

Hansberry's left-leaning politics are reflected in her depiction of a dual consciousness in African American culture: one the fast pace of modern, urban materiality, the other rural agrarianism and black cultural history. Slavery's hideous legacy contains the plantation life and this life, however unjust, was still a continuum of black existence. Black people, however oppressed, managed to carve out a legacy during slavery, with the period emblematic of African ancestral connections. Lena represents this link; her ways and attitudes reflect a more sober, slower, and simpler (though not simplistic) approach to her husband's inheritance; she wants the stability of a home as opposed to the mover-and-shaker attitude of her son. Robert Stepto, referring to the Saturday night life of rural southern African Americans, contends that the "confinement, construction, and sense of circumference that Northern blacks eventually encounter is Southern blacks' daily fare; likewise, the Northerner's relative mobility is something that the Southerner may hope for, something he may achieve, perhaps by boarding a train, perhaps by going into town – as if this will perpetuate the motion, cheer, and sense of community previously known as the special world of Saturdays."<sup>748</sup> Lena clings to the older values of the south; Walter Lee rejects the languid pace and longs for haste and breathless success. So, too, does his sister, whose desire for medical school, the affection of her two suitors (one middle class and the other African), and other avenues of growth (guitar lessons, dancing, etc.) epitomize her Promethean desires. Lena and Ruth on the one hand, and Walter Lee and Beneatha on the other, are the twin pillars of African American culture: southern stability (the past) and northern aspirations (the future). Hansberry, influenced by W. E. B. Du Bois, shared with her mentor the dual consciousness of what Shamooin Zamir calls Du Bois's "vitalist program of an elite political leadership" and "a useable past in American [black] folklore studies" that sought "a set of values to place in opposition to the materialism and technological rationality the folklorists took to be the dominant spirit of their age."<sup>749</sup> Walter Lee and Beneatha epitomize the vitalist leadership so necessary for black emancipation, while Lena and Ruth (her Biblical name reflecting the spirit of sacrifice) represent traditions and folk culture as ballast to the heightened materialism and capitalism. Hansberry, like Du Bois, understood that freedom in capitalist America can lead to profligacy; Lena's morality is required to balance rapaciousness.

Hansberry's film script of the play (surfacing after her untimely death) reveals a deeper political commitment, suggesting that had she lived her play and its film version might have promulgated a stronger social and economic commitment. In this text we discover that Lena's morality is also tempered with political acuity. She describes her prior work as a maid for a white family. After twenty-two years of scrubbing, cleaning, and raising the white children, she asked for a raise of a dollar and a half. "Had practically raised her children for her, and all I was askin' for was a dollar and a half more, and she had the gall to stand there and look at me like I had hit her with something." Mimicking

her boss, Mrs. Holiday, Lena says: "Why *Lee-na!* I never thought to hear *you-ou* talk as if you thought of this as a *job!*" To which Lena replies, "'I don't know what kind of member of no family you have down on their knees scrubbing all them floors and washing all them sheets all these years.' I quit right then and there."<sup>750</sup> Walter Lee, too, is made aware of the social background that constitutes the lives of African Americans in Hansberry's screenplay. He wanders the streets and finds himself amidst a crowd listening to a speaker. We are in the "promised land," the militant speaker says, and in this promised land are jobs and opportunity. Looking for work, the black man "goes to the very man who has stolen his homeland, put him in bondage, defamed his nation, robbed him of his heritage! The White Man!" (131). The speaker then says: "You go to him for a job and he hands you a broom!" (132). The limited avenues to succeed cut against the grain of an America devoted to free enterprise and highlight the hypocrisy of the alleged American dream. According to Michelle Gordon, Hansberry employed an "aesthetics of segregation" and its countering "black liberation" in *A Raisin in the Sun*, in order to expose "the oppressors, as well as the effects of their oppression, systems, and tools."<sup>751</sup> The warring condition of oppressor and oppressed is illuminated when the white representative of the "Welcoming Committee" of Clybourne Park, Linder, arrives at the Younger home. Having put a down payment on a house in a white neighborhood, Linder appears in order to buy back the house from them – in other words, nullify the purchase and offer the family a modest profit in exchange for keeping the neighborhood segregated. Fearful of decreasing the value of their homes (or, in the vernacular – "there goes the neighborhood") because African Americans arrive, Ruth explains to Lena, "You should hear the money those folks raised to buy back the house from us. All we paid and then some." Shocked and galled, Beneatha says, "What they think we going to do – eat 'em?" To which Ruth sagaciously replies: "No, honey, marry 'em" (101). The threat of miscegenation hangs over the white community, adding to their vitriolic fears. Interestingly, Ruth, not the more urbane and educated Beneatha, astutely assesses the situation. If Beneatha and Walter Lee understand social and economic discrimination, Ruth comprehends it on a more personal level.

Christopher Bigsby wrote that "for all its sympathy, humour and humanity," *A Raisin in the Sun* "remains disappointing," owing to its being "essentially that of much of Broadway naturalism," an "unhappy crossbread of social protest and re-assuring resolution," and condemned to "radical simplification and ill-defined affirmation."<sup>752</sup> This is hardly an uncommon criticism of the play, but one that ignores the significance of Hansberry's oft-overlooked character Beneatha. Through Beneatha, Hansberry's model of selfhood points a way beyond an established double consciousness of modern American drama, which imposes a forced choice on the individual, either being trapped

in and frustrated by a repressive social system, or breaking free and leaving it behind. Beneatha wants inner strength through healing mind-body dualism. In the opening of the third act, she informs her African suitor, Asagai, why medicine and healing are driving forces in her life. As a child she would ride her sled in winters down a steep and dangerous hill. A childhood friend, Rufus, “came down too fast and hit the sidewalk.” She “saw his face just split open right there in front of us ... And I remember standing there looking at his bloody open face thinking that was the end of Rufus.” However, the ambulance came and “they fixed the broken bones and they sewed it all up ... and the next time I saw Rufus he just had a little line down the middle of his face ... I never got over that ...” (111–2). Moved by what she saw, Beneatha is expressing a gestalt, a fusing of the mind and body that cuts against the grain of Walter Lee’s ideas of the mind over the body. If Walter Lee wants to overcome bigotry through entrepreneurialism, Beneatha wants to transcend the mind-body divide by applying her intellect to healing. Rufus was “split open,” a symbolic rift. Beneatha sees herself as a force of unity, stitching up the fractured body and soul. She is, in many ways, an American pragmatist along the lines of Dewey and James, engaged in the battle to eliminate the emphasis on mind-body division. The mind-body split, writes Charlene Haddock Seigfried, “is an inherited dualistic classification, which makes such a rigid distinction between body and mind that it becomes impossible to figure out how they relate, or else puts each against the other in an adversarial relationship.” Feminists and pragmatists, Seigfried notes, “have pointed out at great length the oppressive consequences of this split. It is difficult to retain the side of the dualism, the body, without its ghostly double distorting what is meant by the body, embodiedness, or lived body.”<sup>753</sup> Beneatha embodies the goals of a cultural unity.

Beneatha’s actions demonstrate that the choice between enslavement and escape, middle-class and African suitor, or mind and body, is an unnecessary one. Her ambivalence contrasts her brother’s stark double consciousness – either forever a chauffeur or a liquor store owner. For Beneatha, one can function within an oppressive system without giving up freedom entirely, and one can live embodied while still obtaining intellectual achievement. She is the quintessential pragmatist, reflecting what Richard Poirier calls the artist where “loss and sacrifice are the conditions of gain; excess and madness create, by the disappointed hopes they engender, a new equilibrium beyond the circle of the old one.”<sup>754</sup> Beneatha shares her brother’s desire to have it all – her guitar lessons and interests in African music, for example – but she also realizes the limitations of these oversized dreams. The ambiguous ending – we are unsure at the end if she will marry the middle-class George Murchison or leave with Asagai for Africa and practice medicine – is Hansberry’s open-ended view of the family’s future, and in turn the future of African Americans.



In a fragment of unfinished work found after her death, Hansberry wrote that “In life, adequate respect must be paid to the tenacity of the absurd in both human and natural affairs.” While attentive to the absurd, she insisted that “attention must be paid in equal and careful measure to the frequent triumph of man, if not nature, *over* the absurd.” In this, she says, “the modern existentialists have erred,” having become “overwhelmed by the mere fact of the absurd and become incapable of imagining *its* frailty.”<sup>755</sup> This observation illustrates in many ways the distinction between American and European modernism: the enduring and hopeful spirit of Americanism against the despair of European Existentialists. Hansberry is offering a counterweight to European modern drama derived from an essentially sobering but still optimistic American outlook. The next two sections will provide a modernism rooted in Europe’s engagement with futility.



# Part VIII

## Hell Is Other People

*The central range of problems of all ontology is rooted in the phenomenon of time correctly viewed and correctly explained.*

– Martin Heidegger<sup>756</sup>

In his autobiographical book *Confessions* (397 AD), St. Augustine (354–430) asks, if God is the creator of all things then what existed before heaven and earth, and how can time be, if the past is no more, the future is yet to come, and the present disappears at the moment it comes to be? “If time present – if it be time – only comes into existence because it passes into time past,” he posits, “how do we say that even this is, whose cause of being is that it shall not be – namely, so that we cannot truly say that time is, unless because it tends not to be?”<sup>757</sup> Augustine considered measuring time, a problem that, according to Herman Hausheer, “raises more riddles than solutions,” since “the past is nothing,” and if the past and future have no real existence, “how can one measure them?”<sup>758</sup> Like Augustine, time is the centerpiece of Martin Heidegger’s magnum opus, *Being and Time* (1927), in which he argues that no discussion of existence can exclude time: “The fundamental ontological task of the interpretation of being as such thus includes the elaboration of the *temporality of being*.” We are in the world until, he says, “death.”<sup>759</sup> Time’s riddling slipperiness and irresolvable tensions are the grappling issue that, for the French Existentialist of the mid twentieth century, meant our existence in time is *with other people*; we are mirrored, copied, and made whole by relationships, interactions, communication, and miscommunication. Time and identity are only as they are in the duration of being in the presence of others.

The Existentialists were concerned first with the question of identity – the multiplicity and discontinuity of the individual ego as the body moves through

time – and second (which relates to the first), with living with the anguish of death and frustrated by the insuppressible longing for eternity. Forced to endure others within what Samuel Beckett calls time's "double-headed monster of damnation and salvation," there occurs a breakdown of communication because there are "no vehicles of communication." "Even on the rare occasion when word and gesture happen to be valid experiences of personality," Beckett says, "they lose their significance on their passage through the cataract of the personality that is opposed to them."<sup>760</sup> We are the product of past influences and group-think mentality, conforming to the collective conscious will, and establishing a tension between group and independence, spirit and flesh. This is, according to Ernest Becker, the Existential paradox: humanity "is out of nature and hopelessly in it; he is dual, up in the stars and yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath-grasping body that once belonged to a fish and still carries the gill-marks to prove it."<sup>761</sup> The anxious-inducing conundrum of temporality and the presence of others influences dramatic time (and appealed to the Existentialists) because drama is a compact structure in which events pass, characters and relationships change, friction ensues, and feelings ebb and flow. For these reasons modern (particularly but by no means exclusively) French dramatists and Existentialists found common ground. Time creates an "absurd" condition, the term "absurd" (meaning dissonance in music) made popular by Albert Camus's essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942) and indelibly associated in modern drama with Martin Esslin's coinage of the "theatre of the absurd."

Existentialism is, among other things, a rejection of metaphysics and religion, insisting instead that the only way we can assert "being" is to live in the here-and-now. There is no hereafter, nor longevity; our lives are confined to a finite temporality, and what we *do* with our lives during each moment matters. "There are no *accidents* in life," the doyen of Existentialism Jean-Paul Sartre says, therefore "I must be without remorse or regrets as I am without excuse; from the instant of my upsurge in being, I carry the weight of the world by myself alone without anything or any person being able to lighten it."<sup>762</sup> Our actions, furthermore, have consequences to both ourselves and others. As a result, we have universal responsibility, according to Sartre, to act according to this awareness. For the Existentialists this is why people deny freedom of action and volition, pretending instead that external factors such as fate or group-think determine circumstances. But for Sartre and the Existentialists values are the product of free choice, not predetermined and fixed essences. "Existence precedes essence" is the Existential mantra because our "there-ness" (Heidegger's term *Dasein*) is temporal, and responsibility lies in what we do during the time allocated to us. This is why theatre and the actor were a metaphoric linchpin of Existentialist Albert Camus's notion of time's absurdity. "The actor's realm is that of the fleeting," he notes, because his world, like the absurd, is "ephemeral." The actor "projects himself as deeply as possible into

the lives that are not his own” and “will die in three hours under the mask he has assumed today. Within three hours he must experience and express a whole exceptional life. That is called losing oneself to find oneself.”<sup>763</sup> Losing oneself in others is for Existentialists the symbolic abandonment of identity; our existence becomes “absurd” because we are disjointed and battered to and fro by the gaze of others. Try as we might, we cannot reason our way out of the mirror game, but only delude ourselves into thinking our thoughts are our own. We are condemned by what others think of us, absorbing and reflecting these thoughts which we then call our “own.” This mirror-like, cyclical condition takes on the “absurd,” which Esslin took as a rubric for certain playwrights. Theatre of the absurd, he explains, “strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought.” It “has renounced arguing *about* absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being – that is, in terms of concrete stage images.”<sup>764</sup>

The modern themes of temporality and absurdity were crystallized for dramatists in part by the German occupation. From France’s surrender in 1940 and the establishment of the occupying Vichy government under Philippe Pétain, until liberation in 1944, French art and culture experienced a critical malaise, which carried over for another decade after the war. When Camus’s opening sentence in “The Myth of Sisyphus” declares “*Il n’y a qu’un problème philosophique vraiment sérieux: le suicide*” (“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide”),<sup>765</sup> it results from the fact that Camus and other Existentialists lived through the Nazi regime, and this is why, according to the poet Delmore Schwartz, the “problem of suicide – of resisting the Gestapo, or collaborating with the Germans, or joining the underground – seems to be the only serious problem.”<sup>766</sup> For the playwrights, a sense of futility, shame, and absurdity took hold. What gestures, actions, or behaviors constitute capitulation or resistance? How does one negotiate everyday activities amidst savagery? These divisive conditions underscore the actions and events in the plays examined here. As the exegete of despair arrives during the critical point of existence, characters deliberately stall and flounder, equivocate and hedge, and seek comfort in huddling with the masses amidst the smoke screen of moral sanctimony. We look to others to find a moral anchor; we seek refuge in the collective at the expense of our individuality; and we imitate one another in a desperate attempt to escape absurdity. For the playwrights, the obfuscation of meaning, reality, or certainty partakes in the desire to do away with reality and ideology and come to grips, instead, with the central dilemma of how does one choose a moral life amidst immorality? The paradox is inescapable: all moral choices are rendered absurd by the overriding condition of immorality. How does one “act” surrounded by moral turpitude and craven desires to survive? The dramatists situate these circumstances as their central conflicts, not in a

dialectical debate as Ibsen or Shaw might portray it, but rather “absurdly.” The real and the intangible comeingle and enigmas overtake absolutes. In the plays we are invited to observe the mechanics of absurdity, splitting logic down to the most tenuous strands. The disappearance and reappearance of images or suggested images, the reoccurrence of nihilistic symbols, the gaze of others, and the flux of movement from reality to unreality and back again create a theatrical atmosphere designed to transform the spectator into observing the disintegration not only of the familiar, but of certainty of being itself. Within mixed forms – the comic becomes tragic, the tragic is ludicrous – the language shifts abruptly from highbrow to lowbrow, literary to familiar, through a brusque switching of circumstances and persistent obscurantism. The refusal to provide the spectator with tangible references, or furnish them with explicit and casual transitions, complicates the theatrical reception. This is meant to give the audience a feeling that any choice is absurd, any decision pointless, and any action risible. “We need to be virtually bludgeoned into detachment from our daily lives, our habits and mental laziness,” writes Ionesco, “which conceal from us the strangeness of the world.” The real, he adds, “must be dislocated before it can be reintegrated.”<sup>767</sup> The only tangibility is temporal – we exist here and now, powerless to do more, yet compelled to do something.

Time’s relationship to drama is hardly an Existential novelty. According to Jacqueline de Romilly, time in Greek tragedy “shows through change, and in that respect it is obvious that tragedy deals with time.” The subject matter is “one great event, which overthrows all that existed before; its strength rests on a contrast between before and after; and the deeper the contrast, the more tragic the event.”<sup>768</sup> In drama, we meditate on intricate causes and consequences of what occurs onstage; Aristotle stressed in his *Poetics* that the “arrangement” of the plot – the sequence of events – is the playwright’s task in creating the most effective tragedy. This arranging is, in a sense, a temporal control of the plot’s rhythm – and the idea has hardly altered significantly in the history of drama. What has changed, and one of the significant features of modern drama, is how we share time with others. According to Sartre, Existentialism “states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept, and that this being is man.” “Man,” then, “is nothing else but what he makes of himself.”<sup>769</sup> But we do not “make” ourselves in a vacuum; we are in the world among others, and the others’ observation of us is, Sartre notes, “*temporalizing*.” Two or more beings exist in time through “simultaneity” – we exist in the “temporal connection of two existents which are not bound by any other relations.”<sup>770</sup> Shared time is our principal method of co-existence.

In Sartre’s play *No Exit* (*Huis Clos*, 1944), three dead characters are enclosed in a room together – in Hell. The character Inez says, “one always dies too soon – or too late. And yet one’s whole life is complete at that moment, with a

line drawn neatly under it, ready for the summing up. You are – your life, and nothing more.”<sup>771</sup> For the three there is only the gaze of the other; but according to William Barrett “this is exactly what they longed for in life – to lose their own subjective being by identifying themselves with what they were in the eyes of other people.”<sup>772</sup> For Sartre, Inez’s statement characterizes only partly the temporality of our existence. We are not free to exist without sharing experiences of eating, drinking, making love, cursing, and functioning with others – and absorbing their judgments of us. With French Existentialism the vicissitudes of observation evolve on the basis of another’s gaze that is always transitory and temporally influenced. Another character, Garcin, says near the end of the play that “Hell is – other people!” (45) and here Sartre illuminates his “temporal simultaneity.” Our subjectivity incorporates the other’s judgment *as our own*. According to Victor Brombert, *No Exit* “is based entirely on a reversed metaphor: it is not hell that is here described as a condemnation of the self under the judging eye of another consciousness, but it is life-in-the-self and in the presence of others that is hell.”<sup>773</sup> We are simultaneously solipsistic and interdependent; unique and communal; free to think what we wish and condemned to think as others perceive us. The irony is that we escape others in the name of freedom only to be drawn back into the others’ orbit as a condition of our life-in-the-self. Our self-definition is incomplete without others, however much we resist this objectification; our identity depends on a mirror that paradoxically and cruelly becomes interiorized as a means of self-evaluation. *Regarder en soi* – to look into oneself, as one character says in *No Exit*, only uncovers the reflection of others. As Sartre wrote, “other people are basically the most important means we have in ourselves for our own knowledge of ourselves.”<sup>774</sup> Whatever I say or feel, someone else’s judgment intrudes. Humanity is, for Sartre, condemned to an interdependent subjectivity from which we cannot escape.

Sartre also said that in the play he wanted to show that “many people are encrusted in a set of habits and customs, that they harbor judgments about them which make them suffer, but do not even try to change them.”<sup>775</sup> Instead of a theatre of “character,” Sartre called for a theatre of “situations.” What “we have to show in the theatre,” he said, “are simple and human situations and free individuals in these situations choosing what they will be.” Character will emerge “through the hardening of choice, its arteriosclerosis; it is what Kierkegaard called *repetition*. The most moving thing the theatre can show is a character creating himself, the moment of choice, of free decision which commits him to a moral code and a whole way of life.”<sup>776</sup> The resistance to conventional wisdom and the commercial *théâtre du boulevard* was the bailiwick of the absurdists, who were, to varying degrees, influenced by Antonin Artaud (1896–1948). There were other important contributors to modern French drama: the Belgian Michel de Ghelderode, Guillaume Apollinaire, Jean

Cocteau, Jean Giraudoux, Arthur Adamov, Jean Anouilh, and Paul Claudel, each of whom drew from the rich traditions of Gallic dramatic history (Molière, Corneille, Racine, Diderot), and the French theatre of farce, vaudeville, *drame à thèse*, and *drame bourgeois*. But it was Artaud's frontal assault on bourgeois theatre in his "theatre of cruelty" that, more than anyone, influenced playwrights. In *Le Théâtre et Son Double* (*The Theatre and its Double*, 1938), he rejected conventional psychological narrative, replacing it with a theatre that "differentiates" from "text, pure speech, literature, and all other fixed and written means." The current conception of theatre, he remarks, "which consists of having people sit on a certain number of straight-backed or over-stuffed chairs placed in a row and tell each other stories, however marvelous, is, if not the absolute negation of theater – which does not require movement in order to be what it should – certainly its perversion." Rather, "The true purpose of the theater is to create Myths, to express life in the immense, universal aspect, and from that life to extract images in which we find pleasure in discovering ourselves."<sup>777</sup> While his plays and productions often fell short of expectations, his fingerprint on modern drama is unassailable.



# Chapter 23

## The Farce of Intimacy

Ionesco described modernism as a “refusal of metaphysics” because metaphysics can “lead to God” and “God alienates us.”<sup>778</sup> One can justifiably call his plays “refusals.” He wrote “anti-plays,” he says, that “have their origin in two fundamental states of consciousness [...] an awareness of evanescence and of solidarity, of emptiness and of too much presence, of the real transparency of the world and its opacity, of light and of thick darkness.”<sup>779</sup> This dual consciousness results partly from his divided sense of location: he wrote his plays in French (his home for most of his life), but his roots were Romanian, his place of birth. His dictatorial father was a Romanian lawyer whose excessive authoritarianism and craven debt to the fascists nauseated Ionesco. For him, the absurd (he preferred the label “unusual”)<sup>780</sup> was the product of his upbringing: the daily horrors of Eastern Europe, with its moral certainty on the one hand and its brutal repressiveness on the other, illustrated to Ionesco the tittering edges of absurdity. Whether fascism or communism, Ionesco grasped the existential folly of life amidst totalitarianism. In Britain his plays were accused of being a-political; the critic Kenneth Tynan especially found his work short of social consciousness and lacking Brecht’s overt polemics, offering instead “a world of isolated robots, conversing in cartoon-strip balloons of dialogue that are sometimes hilarious, sometimes evocative, and quite often neither, on which occasions they become profoundly tiresome.”<sup>781</sup> But Ionesco knew better: for him there was little wiggle room between communism and fascism, two indistinguishably imposing conformities, and the only way to “attack” them was through absurd-style humor and child-like mockery. This is why he was attracted to the a-logic of Dadaism, the linguistic experimentation of surrealism, Artaud’s disorientation of the sense, and the fundamental silliness of all three (like Artaud, he was attracted to the Marx Brothers), because for

him the way to indict “adults” was to play the puerile class clown. His plays, observes Deborah Gaensbauer, “attacked the language and logic of a society that buries meaning in clichés, propaganda, empty phrases, and abusive slogans.” Like Artaud’s theatre of cruelty, his arch dialogue “shatters into fragments of sound and logic, which the characters hurl at one another with tragicomic consequences.”<sup>782</sup>

“Here’s a thing I don’t understand,” says Mr. Smith reading the newspaper to Mrs. Smith astride the evening fireplace in the opening of Ionesco’s first play *The Bald Soprano* (*La Cantatrice chauve*, 1950). “In the newspaper they always give the age of deceased persons but never the age of the newly born. That doesn’t make sense (*C’est un non-sens*).” To which his wife replies, “I never thought of that!” After another moment of silence, the clock “*strikes seven times*.” More silence. Then “*the clock strikes three times. Silence. The clock doesn’t strike*.”<sup>783</sup> We are at once amidst not only the absurd, but the epicenter of farce, where nonsense (*non-sens*) trumps sense, the irrational overrides the rational, and laughter targets the routines of the bourgeoisie. *The Bald Soprano* is nothing more than two couples, the Smiths and the Martins, who come together on a “normal” evening and speak gobbledygook. They are later met with a Fire Chief (*Le Capitaine des Pompiers*), an “old friend of the family,” Mrs. Smith says (24), who adds to the nonsense with “fables” about animal births and other ludicrous tales. Before any “normalcy” can set in, the maid Mary enters to recite a poem in honor of the Fire Chief. “We are plunging into banality,” Ionesco says of the play, “by draining the sense from the hollowist clichés of everyday language,” and rendering into it the “tragic and the fantastical, the prosaic and the poetic, the realistic and the fantastic, the strange and the ordinary,” yielding “the contradictory principles (there is no theatre without conflict) that may serve as a basis for a new dramatic structure.”<sup>784</sup>

No modern dramatist has ever had a more inauspicious first play (the first performance had only three people in the audience) and then become one of the most produced and popular playwrights worldwide. This is perhaps owing to the shock of the play, which today seems muted (and copied on late night television comedy routines), yet at the time resonated with startling incomprehensibility. Even Pirandello’s disintegration of identity and satiric animus against fixed characterization at least presented people longing for some anchor, some security amidst flux; for Ionesco, no such certainty materializes. The mechanics of the drama, he says, are meant to “function in a vacuum,” divorced from any past style or realistic foothold. The Smiths and the Martins, the two bourgeois couples in the play, are devoid of identity. We may think, at the beginning of the play, that they reflect reality; but this image immediately disintegrates. Instead, characters mimic each other for lack of imagination, parroting contemporary clichés and boilerplate remarks because they are so eager to please they have lost any semblance of self outside the herd. The

Smiths and the Martins, Ionesco says, “no longer know how to talk because they no longer know how to think, they no longer know how to think because they no longer know how to be, they can become anyone and anything, for as they are no longer themselves, in an impersonal world, they can only be someone else, they are interchangeable; Martin can change places with Smith and visa versa, no one would know the difference.” This protean amorphousness and eagerness to please, for Ionesco, distinguishes tragedy and comedy: tragic characters do not change, they break up, because they are “*real*.” Comic characters are people who “do not exist.”<sup>785</sup> They may, at the opening of his plays, “appear” to exist in the proscenium framework of realism, but through time they disintegrate, re-emerge, break up again, and come back together again, only to repeat this cycle of reality and disintegration.

But his plays are not just comedic in jocular fashion, they are “farcical” satires in a modern sense of the term. In “The Psychology of Farce,” Eric Bentley contends that in nineteenth-century farce, “as in dreams, one is permitted the outrage but is spared the consequences.” But unlike the dream world’s inchoate anarchy, farce must, instead, move through the play along the tightrope of what is outrageous and what is normalcy. While the external facts are distorted, the experiences appear ordinary, or at least reference the ordinary. Farce, “while it begins by accepting the bland, placid, imposing façade of life, proceeds to become farcical by knocking the façade down. The farceur, like the lunatic and the unruly child, flies in the face of decorum.”<sup>786</sup> But whereas Bentley is describing nineteenth-century farce, Ionesco, who still owes much to Molière, stresses the absurd by way of what he calls the “*tragedy of language*.”<sup>787</sup> Not merely situation, but language itself breaks apart; through formal innovation and structure, Ionesco taps into the source and essence of literature by repetition – words are mirrored, repeated, worked over, digested, regurgitated, and eventually lose their meaning in any stabilizing frame of reference. Through the ordinariness and repetition of phrases, form and content, constituting a unity that references the real world, dissolve by way of repetition; yet, simultaneously, the “realness” of time and place acknowledges the real world’s presence, and the scenes seem to regroup into “realism” only to dissolve again. He accomplishes this legerdemain by way of language that mixes genre, challenges convention, and overturns predictability. But rather than a mosaic of styles and genres, his plays are like tectonic plates, shifting on a seismic scale, designed to throw us off balance. The appearance of the everyday gradually becomes nonsensical, returns to its footing in the real world, and flies away again into chaos. In the hands of a lesser playwright the stories would disintegrate into sophomoric gibberish. But for Ionesco the linguist tones transform with exquisite timing, dancing on a tight-rope of the real and the absurd, as we enter a world of warped values and group-think behavior. “I aspire to the impossible,” he says; “I want my words to be transparent” and

"All that remains for me to do is to give the lie to each spoken word by taking it apart, by making it explode, by transfiguring it."<sup>788</sup> For instance, in honor of the Fire Chief, Mary the Maid recites a ludicrous poem, repeating things and people that catch fire. As she recites the poem, "*the Smiths are pushing her off-stage*" while the Martins reflect on the poem's meaning:

MRS. MARTIN: That sent chills up my spine ...  
 MR. MARTIN: And yet there's a certain warmth in those lines ...  
 FIRE CHIEF: I thought it was marvelous.  
 MRS. SMITH: All the same ...  
 MR. SMITH: You're exaggerating ...  
 FIRE CHIEF: Just a minute ... I admit ... all this is very subjective ... but this is my conception of the world. My world. My dream. My ideal ... (37)

However true to the spirit of a "Fire Chief," the very pronouncement of the poem, the repetitious words that build on the mundane, and the sycophantic reactions, are absurd in exaggeration, enlargement, and heightened awareness – yet they could still be interpreted as a mimetic replica of an ordinary day-in-the-life of the bourgeoisie. The ludicrous is pushed but still never abandons the realm of reality. The characters are condemned to a cyclical world, literally bored to death and forced into repetition to avoid the dread of their vapid lives. To shed light on this condition required repetition and exaggeration. As Ionesco says, "For if the essence of the theatre lay in the enlargement of effects, it was necessary to enlarge them even more, to underline them, to emphasize them as much as possible." This, for him, is "the very basis of the grotesque, the realms of caricature, to transcend the pale irony of witty drawing-room comedies, [...] to push everything to paroxysm to the point where the sources of the tragic lie."<sup>789</sup> It is not so much anti-realism as a kind of new reality. Creating this theatre "of violence – violently comic, violently tragic," requires what Martin Esslin calls "shock tactics; reality itself, the consciousness of the spectator, his habitual apparatus of thought – language – must be overthrown, dislocated, turned inside out, so that he suddenly comes face to face with a new perception of reality."<sup>790</sup>

If, as George Wellwarth contends, *The Bald Soprano* is "a sort of deadly lullaby that perverts the function of language,"<sup>791</sup> Ionesco's next play, *The Lesson* (*La Leçon*, 1951), is at once the most characteristic and unsettling work, an admixture of the comedic and the macabre. Like *The Bald Soprano*, we open with a mundane setting; a Professor's home readied by the Maid to engage with a series of students in private tutoring. Meticulously, incrementally, and intentionally the play shifts from an ordinary tutorial lesson to totalitarianism. The Professor is as eager to please as the student, and each tries to control the other. But it is the Professor who dominates, through insecurity, equivocation,

indirection, repetition, and in the end brute force. Trying to encourage the frustrated Pupil, the Professor says: "Oh! It will come ... you mustn't give up ... young lady ... I beg your pardon ... have patience ... little by little ... You will see, it will come in time ... What a nice day it is today ... or rather, not so nice ... Oh! but then yes it is nice. In short, it's not too bad a day, that's the main thing ... ahem ... ahem ... it's not raining and it's not snowing either" (48).

The ellipses, retreats, advances, lunges at meaning, equivocation, backtracking – all reflect a movement, a knife thrust through time, a continuo of motion reaching for control, domination, and suppression. By the end the Pupil is forced to repeat the word "knife" (*couteau*) until the knife itself is plunged into her as an erotic act (they both "sigh" at the moment of murder). In the original version, after the crime is committed, "the maid calms the professor's fears by offering him the protection of an armband with a swastika-like insignia."<sup>792</sup> This symbol was likely eliminated in performance due to its obviousness. Ionesco makes his case against fascism instead by repetitious language, because repetition is a form of fascism, a unifying act currying the favor of those in the lead. The act of conformity is most evident in repetition; it verifies the leader's sanctity, establishes group-think commitment, and strips away any chance – any moment – to question, reflect, challenge, or qualify. Repetition creates and secures the rhythm of herd mentality (and, to put a fine point on it, it was Goebbels and the Nazi propaganda machine that said "If you repeat a lie often enough people will believe it").

Ionesco uses the nerdy and impotent Professor as the symbol of totalitarianism. This pedant is afflicted by self-consciousness and megalomania; his preposterous attempts to teach multiplication problems, gobbledygook lecture on Spanish and neo-Spanish, phonetics, rarified academes, and tutelage of pronunciation are designed to topple the young student's equilibrium. The barrage of words, non sequiturs, incongruities, and demands for repetition gain momentum, reducing the Pupil to cries of a "toothache" – the only defense she hopes can stand between herself and his increasing hostility. Time and violence seem to coincide and rise in language like hot air balloons, as the Professor says:

PROFESSOR: That's it, but don't interrupt ... (62–3).

If you utter several sounds at an accelerated speed, they will automatically cling to each other, constituting syllables, words, even sentences, that is to say groupings of various importance, purely irrational assemblages of sounds, denuded of all sense, but for that very reason the more capable of maintaining themselves without danger at a high altitude in the air. By themselves words charged with significance will fall, weighted down by their meaning, and in the end they will always collapse, fall ...

PUPIL: ... On deaf ears.

The play juxtaposes authority and pedagogy, leader and follower, and ultimately unquestioning herd mentality and complacency. The Pupil makes one attempt to contradict the Professor, only to be shouted down by his bel-ligerent panegyric. The Professor, a coward behind the mask of academic authority, wields his position like a knife, literally and figuratively.

In his next play (also poorly received initially), *The Chairs* (*Les Chaises*, 1952), an Old Woman and an Old Man prepare to entertain invisible guests with whom the couple seem to be on intimate terms. As each doorbell rings, heralding new guests, each one ushered in to take a new chair, the empty chairs signal the presence of hallucinatory people. The play is ruled by fantasy – Colonel, Lady, Miss Belle, Emperor, and other invisible guests – orchestrated into various chairs, entering from various doors, and hosted by the couple amidst their phantasmagoria. The manic choreography of these two people rushing in and out of the room bringing in and arranging chairs for guests who aren't there, shuffling them around like party organizers, underscores the esoteric nature of this intimate masterpiece. The suffering of these two lonely people, their “ontological void,”<sup>793</sup> Ionesco says, is registered in its deflection, ghosts placed into invisible chairs, where onstage perceptions reside in the absence of actual people. The hullabaloo, like in most of Ionesco's plays, escalates, as the couple appear to be hosting not just a party but a convention. The frustrations and thwarted opportunities of several decades of married life are thrust into view through the cruel, bizarre, unusual, and painfully hilarious ceremony of hosting unoccupied chairs. The invisible crowd, now containing royalty, awaits the Old Man's testimonial, to be delivered by the Old Man's proxy the Orator. The Old Man enlists the professional Orator who will “speak in my name” (121), because the Old Man has “so much difficulty expressing myself” (120). In the end the Old Man and Woman repeat, “He will come” (153–4), assuring the crowd (us?) now impatiently agitated for the anticipated main pronouncement – the meaning of the Old Man's life. But the Orator, the only other visible character in the play, faces a row of empty chairs at the end of the drama, uttering mere Dada-like gibberish. In 1952, shortly after *The Chairs* was produced, Ionesco said, “At certain moments the world appears to me emptied of meaning, reality seems unreal. It is this feeling of unreality, the search for some essential reality, nameless and forgotten [...] that I have tried to express through my characters, who drift through incoherence, having nothing of their own apart from their anguish, their remorse, their failures, the vacuity of their lives.”<sup>794</sup> This is as close to the tragic as Ionesco will dare to go, the portrait of two old people at the end of their lives, lurching clumsily and furtively after some existential confirmation of their plaintive existence, ultimately “doomed to vanish like the world.”<sup>795</sup>

The many varieties of allegory in Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* (*Rhinocéros*, 1958) – the herd mentality, the breakdown of civility, the competing styles of realism

and absurdity, the juxtaposition of the bourgeoisie and the parodic, the sound effects of stomping, serpentine rhinos rampaging through the city – are rooted in a modernist disorientation. This play is one of what were to be his four “Bérenger plays” – *The Killer*, *Rhinoceros*, *A Stroll in the Air*, and *Exit the King* – because of the central character’s common name. In *Rhinoceros*, a modern town is invaded by an offstage herd of rhinos that eventually infect the inhabitants as they themselves transform into rhinos. Bérenger is in a funk as the play begins, and his friend, the sycophantic Jean, tries to pull him out of his malaise. Jean’s puffed-up authority, he says, is due to his “moral strength,”<sup>796</sup> which ironically backfires and succumbs to the herd mentality in the marvelously theatrical second act. There Bérenger visits the ailing Jean, who is sprouting horns and turning green in his transformative switch into rhino-hood. Throughout Jean is the perfect citizen, encouraging his friend to see “an interesting play”: “Do you know anything about the avant-garde theatre there’s so much to talk about? Have you seen Ionesco’s plays?” (23), he says, a nod to Ionesco’s in-joke humor. Ionesco’s ribaldry lets no one off the hook: the Logician who fails to produce logic, the good citizenry who conform to every fad, the raging irrelevant debates over a rhino’s two or one horns, and the town council that tries to discern the veracity of rhinos in the neighborhood. In Act Three Bérenger is visited by his other friend, Dudard, who, through the course of the act, converts to the herd and spouts boilerplate defense as he relinquishes his individuality.

BÉRENGER: We must attack this evil at the roots.

DUDARD: The evil! That’s just a phrase! Who knows what is evil and what is good? It’s just a question of personal preferences (80).

In the end, even the love between Daisy and Bérenger fails to overcome the lure of conformity. As Dudard says, “I’ve renounced marriage. I prefer the great universal family to the little domestic one” (93). What Ionesco deplors is the cheap sacrifices we make and the easy bargains we arrange in order to conform, which, as Martin Esslin notes, “turns our mass societies into collections of centrally directed automata.”<sup>797</sup> That rhinoceroses are on the loose in a bourgeois neighborhood stretches credulity to the breaking point – and this is Ionesco’s intent. The conceit works effectively as a symbol of the marauding encroachment of the totalitarian state. “Imagine one fine morning you discover that rhinoceroses have taken power. They have a rhinoceros ethics, a rhinoceros philosophy, a rhinoceros universe.”<sup>798</sup> The stage presents a world where conformity lurks behind every corner. Ionesco said that “It is precisely the conformist, the petit bourgeois, the ideologist of every society who is lost and dehumanized.”<sup>799</sup> That the play ends with Bérenger’s cry “I’m not capitulating!” (107) is evidently his last-ditch effort against the inevitable. The

acute paralysis of will, vacuity of imagination, bureaucratic corruption, vicious authoritarianism, self-serving interests, demonstrative self-congratulatory pandering, and primarily the need to please at all costs to one's individuality are for Ionesco symptomatic of modern culture's predicament. The cacophony of demands from both left and right extremists is symbolized by the barrage of noise in the thundering herd of rhinos trumpeting through the town. The rhinos epitomize an excess of power bereft of vision; for Ionesco, we live in tragic times, not merely because our world is assailed by moral and social catastrophes, but because our power to change circumstances has reached an aporia, what Raymond Williams describes as "the loss of hope" in modern tragedy, "the slowly settling loss of any acceptable future."<sup>800</sup> All we can do is conform.

For Ionesco, we are not unified selves but multiple beings, jostling, contending, and bargaining for existence. His first wife Marguerite tells the King in *Exit the King*, "This is not the real you. It is an odd collection of bits and pieces, horrid things that live in you like parasites."<sup>801</sup> *Exit the King* (*Le Roi se meurt*, 1962, originally titled *La Cérémonie*) is a comic sermon with tragic overtones – Jan Kott calls it "the only modern comedy about dying and the only *comedy* with a hero and the main actor who begins *dying* in the very first scene before he dies in the last one"<sup>802</sup> – as the persistent and pitiable King attempts to halt his march to death. Here, like other Ionesco plays, we have a typical Existential expression of temporal volatility. Ionesco's preoccupation with farce and the disruption of certainty – everything rooted out of hiding by fate – becomes an integral piece of modernist conceit. His work is described as "viscosity" – sticking to, or adhering – a term used by Jacques Guicharnaud to connote the "sinking" and "progression" as his plays impose mathematical rigor "on human phenomena," which "often adds a process of geometric progression or acceleration."<sup>803</sup> The plays' momentum gathers in the repetitious language or sounds that pile up like a train wreck. In *The Bald Soprano*, the clock strikes repeatedly without making sequential sense; in *The Lesson* the teacher's words repeat until they become murder weapons; in *The Chairs* the couple mimic each other in desperation; in *Rhinoceros* the herd thunders and everyone repeats the language of the herd; and in *Exit the King* King Bérenger accumulates diminishing stature through repetition as his kingdom – and his body – visibly shrinks. Ionesco creates a shimmering surface where reality and fantasy intertwine, an effect he produces by means of aural repetition.



# Chapter 24

## The Tragedy of Intimacy

If Ionesco's plays are, as he says, a "denunciation of mechanization and emptiness,"<sup>804</sup> Jean Genet's are an affirmation of rebelliousness against such vapidty. His characters thirst for identity, to break free from the confines of normalcy, and long for an act of Existential "heroism," writes Robert Brustein.<sup>805</sup> He aligned with the underdog all his life, consorting with criminals, demimondes, and prostitutes in his youth, and took up the cause of Black Panthers and Palestinians in maturity. His plays are an inverted morality, where the obscene is vaulted above the complacent, and the underdog trumps the top-dog. Genet rejects a world of morbid purulence and scurrilous superiority that crows over the lowly. His rebelliousness was accentuated by Sartre in his book *Saint Genet*, though the book also made Genet uncomfortable. Success never sat well with Genet, who sought to rend asunder the values of the bourgeoisie. Georges Bataille's description of "inner experience" could well fit Genet: "Man achieves his inner experience at the instant when bursting out of the chrysalis he feels that he is tearing himself, not tearing something outside that resists him. He goes beyond [*dépassement*] the objective awareness bounded by the walls of the chrysalis and this process, too, is linked with the turning topsy-turvy of his original mode of being."<sup>806</sup> Turning everything topsy-turvy by way of an inverted morality was the core of Genet's art.

Jean Genet (1910–1986) was a novelist, playwright, essayist, thief, outcast, and radical polemicist whose works, along with Ionesco's, mark the highpoint of French Existential drama. He wrote six plays – *The Balcony*, *The Blacks*, *The Screens*, *The Maids*, *Deathwatch*, and *Splendid* (re-discovered in 1993) – each containing the blueprint for engaging human relationships and heightened theatricality. When Roland Barthes speaks of the rise of modernist theatre in Baudelaire's work, he could as well be addressing Genet. "What is theatricality,"

he asks, positing: "It is theatre-minus-text, it is a density of signs and sensations built up on stage starting from the written argument; it is the ecumenical perception of sensuous artifice – gesture, tone, distance, substance, light – which submerges the text beneath the profusion of its external language."<sup>807</sup> Genet sought to penetrate the nature of identity, using theatricality over language as a means of examining outer appearances and inner consciousness, and using masks, as Christopher Innes contends, to give "shape to a void or reflected images in a receding perspective of mirrors."<sup>808</sup> Like other Existentialists, he was politically aware of class status and bigotry. For Genet, like Ionesco, the only successful political act is grand refusal. Bettina Knapp called him "a dwarf trying to destroy a mountain," i.e. "society." As the rejected and outcast criminal and homosexual, Genet embraced these so-called stigmas and labels not only as a badge of honor, but as a requisite means of flaunting and taunting society. Genet, the "rejected one," Knapp says, "must not only damage without (society), but hurt within (himself). He sought punishment, social ostracism, prison, or capital punishment with an inner joy."<sup>809</sup>

Writing about the artist and his friend Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966), Genet says, "Every man has probably experienced that sort of grief, if not terror, at seeing how the world and its history seem caught in an ineluctable movement, which keeps gaining momentum and which seems able to change, toward ever coarser ends, nothing but the visible manifestations of the world." Since we cannot change the visible world, the world of phenomena, we rid ourselves of externals, "not just by refusing to act upon them, but by stripping ourselves enough to discover that secret place in ourselves from which an entirely different human adventure might possibly begin."<sup>810</sup> For Genet, the grand refusal is not only external, it is internal; that disintegration of identity, he writes in homage to Jean Cocteau, is in his "Poems, essays, novels, theater – the entire body of work cracks, and let anguish be discovered in the fissures." Only when the artwork creates the feeling of "*eternity that passes*," capturing the "lightning and organize, starting from the illumination that shows the void, a verbal architecture" and illustrating art "from the void," can an appearance show "the void [ripping] itself free."<sup>811</sup>

Giacometti's sculptures offer insights into Genet's plays because they illustrate the sense of stripping down, frailty, exposure, and motion – "eternity that passes" – within a void, an inscrutable gap in human contact. The material used to make Giacometti's figures is bronze, suggesting metallic studiousness, while delicacy is evident in the figures' slenderness. We are made aware of the gaps between people – the spaces dividing us, as each of the three figures circle and mimic gestures. Giacometti explores the gaps and the effort spent in seeking to close them. For Giacometti, "Distance, far from being an accident," is, according to Sartre, "part and parcel of every object." The distance between people is "not a voluntary isolation, nor even a withdrawal. It is something required by



*Three Men Walking II*, sculpture, Albert Giacometti, Bronze; H. 30–1/8, W. 13, D. 12–3/4 inches

circumstances, a ceremony, a recognition of difficulties,” a product of “forces of attraction and forces of repulsion.”<sup>812</sup> Like a magnetic force that attracts and repels, human contact for Giacometti and Genet is a matter of magnetic charisma and relentless envy. The two-dimensional portrait above captures only partially the sculptural dynamic of interaction; observed in three dimensions, we absorb the three-way relationships and spaces between them akin to magnetic attraction-repulsion force-fields. The gap and the mirror relationship of each figure to the other informs our understanding of connection and disconnection: each figure tries to copy the movement and gesture of the other. Who, then, is the leader and who the facsimile? Genet’s characters are well aware of this gap and reflection between us, and Sartre’s words – hell is other people – are evident in his plays. But hell for Genet is also inward, a sense of interior fragmentation, bits and pieces, shards of glass, similar to what the Harlem Renaissance author Zora Neale Hurston – another author and playwright of human fissures – called a self-awareness of feeling “like a brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall.”<sup>813</sup> For Genet, each fragment of a person is contained in the gaze of others, a miscellany of other people’s impressions, words, gestures, and judgments. We are each other’s reflection and alter ego; hell is other people because hell is only what we are in the eyes of others. In Genet’s “hall of mirrors,”

Martin Esslin's coinage,<sup>814</sup> we endow the self in and through others, by trying to assess the gaze of approval or disapproval. Genet is trying to define the complexity of existence by using theatricality as a tool: enactment, play-acting, role-playing, costuming, affecting the manner and voice of another, are for him theatrical tools, as well as rituals we perform for others. The theatre is a laboratory of masquerade, no different than what occurs daily but perhaps in theatre more honestly because the theatre admits to its charades.

*Deathwatch* (*Haute Surveillance*, 1949), published and produced after *The Maids*, was Genet's first written play. Though the play was penned before his essay on Giacometti, the three characters in *Deathwatch* resemble the three figures in the artist's sculpture. Maurice and Lefranc are petty thieves; Green Eyes a murderer, which places him on the highest rung of Genet's inverted social hierarchy. Genet challenges civilized restraint and sanctimonious pretensions by beatifying the social misfit. The three characters are, like in Sartre's *No Exit*, trapped in a cell, circling each other, seeking positions of power and affirmation, but they are jockeying for acknowledged "honors." Maurice and Lefranc want to emulate Green Eyes, seek his approval, and vie for his attention. The play occurs in a prison cell, a setting all-too-familiar to Genet. Yet Genet wants to jettison realism's social documentary affect; he is after metaphysical ideas rather than merely recreating prison life. The first stage direction says "*The entire play unfolds as in a dream.*"<sup>815</sup> The realistic milieu disguises the ethereal atmosphere, where Maurice and Lefranc promise to murder Green Eyes's girl friend once released from prison. Murder, hardly a stranger to Genet's theatrical universe, is the ultimate crime, lending cachet to anti-social morality and romancing of the outsider. Accusing Maurice and Lefranc of being "a pair of small time crooks," Green Eyes says, "After taking the big leap into the void, after cutting myself off from human beings as I have done, you still expect me to respect your rules? I'm stronger than you and I can do as I like" (146). Within the intensity of three people unable to avoid the others' gaze, the working-class and effeminate Maurice goads the intellectual Lefranc: "I'm going to strip you. I want to leave you naked. You feed on others. You dress yourself up, you decorate yourself with our jewels, I accuse you! You steal our crimes! You wanted to know what a real crime's made of. I was watching you take it apart" (158).

The parasitic herd mentality can only be transcended by an act of "beauty," but for Genet this beauty is crime, violence, terror, and defiling things held in reverence – not only literally, but spiritually and aesthetically. "*There is a close relationship between flowers and convicts,*" he says in his autobiography *The Thief's Journal*; "The fragility and delicacy of the former are of the same nature as the brutal insensitivity of the latter."<sup>816</sup> Green Eyes embodies a glowing contradiction: murderer, yet detached from the act of murder, trying to deconstruct the event that is only a fleeting memory to him. He may not, as he

says, be “as strong as Snowball” (145), the unseen black murderer and ultimate authority in the adjacent cell, “Because he killed in order to rob and loot, but, like him [Snowball], I killed in order to live, and now I’m smiling” (145). He warns the other two that to commit the largest crime comes with a cost; guilt, doubt, and uncertainty. Lefranc is the intellectual hoodlum who writes letters for the illiterate Green Eyes, attracted to the visceral sexuality and aura of the group leader. Maurice is the passive, feminine counterpart, Lefranc’s rival for the affections and attention of Green Eyes. The power status of each changes abruptly, surprisingly, and in fits and starts reminiscent of Strindberg’s notions of human mind-games and Hurston’s shards of glass. Maurice possesses the sensual connection to Green Eyes, the bonding of the less educated that employs bodily over mental agility and expression. The manner in which Maurice tosses his head, Lefranc says, “like a whore” (158), intimidates Lefranc, because he is incapable of using his head, body, and gestures in the same way. Maurice’s superiority and the ability to attract Green Eyes drives Lefranc into a jealous, murderous rage. It is also the gesture of violence in the tossing of the hair. As Genet says, “I give the name violence to a boldness lying idle and enamored of danger. It can be seen in a look, a walk, a smile, and it is in you that it creates an eddying. It unnerves you. This violence is a calm that disturbs you.”<sup>817</sup>

The same triangular relationships are contained in his next play (performed first). *The Maids* (*Les Bonnes*) is a story of two sister-maids, Solange and Claire, planning to poison their mistress when she returns home from her lover’s trial. It is based on an incident in 1933 involving a murder by two maids. Underlying the surface plot, however, is a complex and compelling picture of power dynamics, gender constructions, class divisions, and what Richard Schechner calls “identity slippage” where “it is impossible to pin down the characters” because they are “all in the process of desiring to be somebody else and never really achieving that through their playing.”<sup>818</sup> The maids live vicariously, waiting anxiously for the Madame to return, plotting her murder, emulating her behavior, enacting a fantasy game of lordship and servility, retreating cowardly from the poison at the critical moment and their only rebellion is what Sartre calls their “dream within a dream,” using the scant reality which consciousness has given them “to imagine that they are becoming the master who imagines them.” In their dream of becoming the master, the maids “are already *fake*. Pure products of artifice, their minds are inside out, and they are always other than themselves.”<sup>819</sup> Genet frames the sisters as maids, equal in their lowly status, jockeying in the opening of the play for positions of power. They pretend to be the Mistress, try to rehearse the murder, but woefully fail to commit the crime even in rehearsal. Their struggle penetrates into the notion of consciousness, self-awareness, and identity formation. Martin Esslin writes that the “revolt of the maids against the master is not a social gesture, a revolutionary action; it is tinged with nostalgia and longing, like the revolt of

the fallen angel Satan against the world of light from which he is forever banished. That is why this revolt finds its expression not in protest but in ritual.”<sup>820</sup> There is, indeed, a ceremonial appreciation of the Madame, an effort to emulate her manner, dress, movement, and behavior. Genet is well aware of actors performing roles, and role-playing is an essential feature of the play. But for Genet it is not merely imitation or authentic facsimile in a naturalistic manner. He is investigating the way in which we formulate our self-identity – amorphous, protean, and ultimately dependent on others at the moment of being. In other words, we are who we are only in the moment; the past and the future have little bearing on our ontology. Genet’s characters, Una Chaudhuri writes, are in a continual process of “self-denial and self-erasure.”<sup>821</sup> We dress-up, make-up, and perform our identity in a protean manner, shape-changing and self-fashioning at will, existing in the Existential manner of “becoming” and never “being.” The appearance of being is immediately subverted by the next appearance of becoming, and it is done theatrically with costume, behavior, voice, and gesture. Genet’s plays, writes David Bradby, “strive for a ritual or ceremonial action that will create the conditions for belief to be first evoked, then questioned, and finally subverted.”<sup>822</sup> We cannot fix our identity because we cannot halt time.

During the initial “Act” of the play’s opening, Claire “enacts” the Madame and Solange scurries about trying to please Claire. We are, at first, meant to believe that Claire is the Madame of this Louis XIV abode, where Claire express *noblesse oblige*:

And I contain within me both vengeance and the maid and give them a chance for life, a chance for salvation. Claire, it’s a burden, it’s terribly painful to be a mistress, to contain all the springs of hatred, to be the dunghill on which you grow. You want to see me naked every day. I am beautiful, am I not? And the desperation of my love makes me even more so, but you have no idea what strength is needed! (43).

But there is something fake about Claire’s expression of exhaustion, sacrifice, and power-induced headaches. Power is nothing more than language and emulation, absorption and “acting,” copying and reproducing. Genet is interested in how power is “staged” through the body of the actor, or as Dalia Judovitz writes, the body is “not given, but rather constructed like a scenario that derives its meaning from the context and finds new meanings through its transportations into other contexts. The logic of the body thus emerges in the order of translation, understood not as an originary given, but as a script that attains specific meanings through its transpositions.”<sup>823</sup>

What is important for Genet is not actors playing maids – playing “maidness” and getting the nuances right – but rather the fact of acting itself.

"I attempted to effect a displacement that, in permitting a declamatory tone, would bring theatre into the theatre," he said.<sup>824</sup> The actors are part actresses and part maids, what David Grossvogel calls "hybrids" – beings transforming and shape-changing at every moment. The characters of Solange, Claire, and the Madame are fluid, in motion, temporal, and at once maids, actresses, actresses-as-maids, actresses-as-maids-as-Madame, actresses-as-dominating-and-as-submissive. Only in the theatre, Grossvogel says, "are these several realities blended within the irreality of the stage. It is the stage that Genet wants to preserve, a justified bias that defines an art form in terms of its ability to do what no other form can do as well, as totally, or in the same way."<sup>825</sup> Genet complicates this even more in his assertion that the roles should be performed by men. This adds another layer to "performing" that inverts, distorts, and yet reveals a kind of beauty in the very act of performing itself. The role-playing is embedded with sexuality, the dresses and costumes eliciting fantasies, voyeurism, gender-bending, and a cacophony of these elements that fall back in on themselves, invert and subvert, arouse and mock, titillate and ironize.

Even still, the play is not merely a theatre-game of charades; it is a deeply investigative drama about power, longing, and class. The maids are linked by their self-reflection; they see in each other the desire to be what they are not, engaged in a master-slave dynamic that is tragic in their inability to ever rise about their social class. They are locked in a Hegelian confrontation of self-consciousness, which "exists in and for itself," Hegel says in his chapter on "Lordship and Bondage," when "it exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged." For Hegel, when self-consciousness "is faced by another self-consciousness," it then "has come *out of itself*." This consciousness "has a twofold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self."<sup>826</sup> Claire sees herself reflected in Solange; Solange in Claire; and both in the Madame. Following this Hegelian dialectical trajectory, Jacques Derrida says cryptically in *Glas* that "When Genet gives names he both baptizes and denounces."<sup>827</sup> Like a magnet that repulses and attracts, Genet glorifies the aesthetic actions of his characters, but the values of what is beautiful are topsy-turvy. According to Josephine Jacobsen and William Mueller, Genet's plays "call their audiences and readers to a radical change in their sense of values and, consequently, in their behavior. He writes with a passion to subvert the entire structure of values considered normative to Western civilization."<sup>828</sup>

Genet synchronizes the gradual deterioration of the maids' machinations at the moment when the Madame tosses off her second-hand clothes first to Claire, then Solange. This is a critical turning point in the play, because up to now the planned murder, despite the sisters' bungling, seems possible.

MADAME: You can have it altered. There's enough velvet in the train alone for the sleeves. And for you, Solange, I'm going to give you ... What shall I give you? Here, this coat.

(*She hands Solange the magnificent fur cape*).

SOLANGE: Oh! Madame ... never ... Madame's too kind (71).

Once possessing the hand-me-downs Solange and Claire retreat from their planned poisoning. No matter how much play-acting, they realize their position is intractable. Forever servile, the best they can hope for is to prosper by sycophancy, catering to the whims of the higher ups and living on table-scrap.

Genet's poetics are a repository of metaphors addressing the social construction of identity – actually the physical dressing up of identity. Clothes are an essential ingredient of *The Maids*: the stage is festooned with flowers – “*flowers in profusion*” (35) – and the clothes are a decorous way he asserts identity formation. The very first line is Claire's: “Those gloves! Those eternal gloves! I've told you time and again to leave them in the kitchen. You probably hope to seduce the milkman with them” (35). This is seduction by costume. The irony in the play is immediate: “*Solange has been playing with a pair of rubber gloves and observing her gloved hands, which are alternately spread fanwise and folded in the form of a bouquet*” (36). Hands, gloves, bouquets – all suggest dressing a part. Claire is demanding Solange to “Lay out my things” (36); calls “My dress!” (37); and they debate whether she should wear the white or red dress. Claire is pretending to be the mistress, with the role-playing couched in costuming. Gender and class are identifiable by outfitting, fashion is the demarcation of status, and what one wears signifies social hierarchy. The sister-maids are “maids” by virtue of their work and clothes; their lowly status is visually evident. Yet when they “dress up” as the Madame, in a kind of secrecy that children and the poor enact, they experience a fantasy, albeit only in the moment, that denies or at least masks their working-class stigmatization. The guilty pleasures derived from make-believe, the mockery of potentates, child-like dressing up, and the plotting of murder is an integral part of their play-acting: Solange and Claire challenge each other, instigate, prod, badger, and provoke in ways that are cruel and kind, vicious and compassionate. Genet understands the language of the poor, the constant intimidation and violent undertone in every phrase used as a defense and a way to reinforce defense mechanisms. If one is threatened by a compatriot, it is only an act, preparing the underdog to face a world that intends real harm. The maids try to teach each other how to encase oneself in a thick shell; like clothes, giving-and-taking verbal abuse builds a resistant stone wall against effacement, derision, and dismissal.

Genet's political and theatrical inclinations accelerated with his next plays. *The Balcony* (*Le Balcon*, 1956) takes place in a brothel – a house of illusion



(*maison d'illusions*) – with dignitaries as clients. *The Blacks* (*Les Nègres*, 1957) continues his polemical intention, an indictment of racism with black actors in whiteface masks. *The Screens* (*Les Paravents*, 1958) examines the conflicts of Arab and colonial powers with the persistent Genet themes of illusion. As Existentialism and Absurdism morphed into the 1970s, the esoteric works had lost their power to confront and affront. In France Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism overtook existentialism, casting off the political baggage of postwar aesthetics to be replaced by Structuralism's detached logic of cultural binaries and structural comparatives. The director Peter Brook, who was among others responsible for bringing Artaud and others to the English-speaking world, observed that "The theatre of the Absurd did not seek the unreal for its own sake. It used the unreal to make certain explorations, because it sensed the absence of truth in our everyday exchanges, and the presence of the truth in the seeming far-fetched." Though Brook acknowledged that this type of theatre had reached an "impasse" because its novelty "wears thin," it nonetheless defined the goals of this movement, and nowhere more so than the exemplary figure of modern drama in the upcoming chapter.<sup>829</sup>



Part IX

Modernist Improvising



# Chapter 25

## Beckett Impromptu

*All strive, some planning, others acting; the tumult is indescribable. But the ultimate aim of it all, what is it? To sustain ephemeral and tormented individuals through a short span of time in the most fortunate case with endurable want and comparative freedom from pain, which, however, is at once attended with ennui; then the reproduction of this race and its striving. In this evident disproportion between the trouble and the reward, the will to live appears to us from this point of view, if taken objectively, as a fool, or subjectively, as a delusion, seized by which everything living works with the utmost exertion of its strength for something that is of no value.*

– Schopenhauer<sup>830</sup>

*fuck life.*

– Beckett, *Rockaby* (1981)<sup>831</sup>

In the closing of Samuel Beckett's most popular play, *Waiting for Godot* (1953), the two disenfranchised tramps, Vladimir and Estragon (their sobriquet Didi and Gogo), have, for a second time, been visited by two other wayward indigents, the orotund Pozzo and his deracinated cohort, Lucky, the latter restrained by a rope. In Act Two (as in Act One) Pozzo passes through, this time blind (Lucky is now mute), and after a brief visit (again) wants to leave (again). Vladimir and Estragon demure, protest, and then “*violently*” (Beckett's stage directions) try to prevent his departure; Vladimir, “*Striking Pozzo,*” says, “It's this bastard Pozzo at it again,” to which Estragon replies, “Make him stop it. Kick him in the crotch” (77). Beckett's stage directions indicate: “*Pozzo extricates himself with cries of pain and crawls away. He stops, saws the air blindly, calling for help. Vladimir, propped on his elbow, observes his retreat*” (77). Beckett

provides no dialogue, nor specifics regarding the violence, but instead opens the way for actors to improvise. The impromptu violence erupts suddenly, often couched in circus-like vaudeville, pratfalls, slapstick, and Laurel and Hardy or Marx Brothers anarchy (the mirror-like passing of the hats in *Godot* is especially derivative of Harpo and Groucho in *Duck Soup*). Beckett called vaudeville “the comedy of an exhaustive enumeration,”<sup>832</sup> and this anarchy, with actors clowning and behaving violently, contradicts the perception that Beckett occluded such chaos and holds a tight rein on productions. Beckett the director was notably opposed to “acting”; the actor playing the original Lucky, Jean Martin, reports that “Beckett does not want his actors to act. He wants them to do only what he tells them. When they try to act, he becomes angry.”<sup>833</sup> There is, however, a distinction between “acting” – with its “back story” circumstances – and existing in the moment, with Beckett unequivocally favoring the latter.

Beckett, writes Martin Puchner, insisted “that everything must be staged precisely the way he wrote it and that the few selected stage props and isolated gestures be realized with utmost precision.”<sup>834</sup> I’m not so sure of this. Certainly for Beckett sparsity means removing everything except the essential, leaving audiences with the vision of a Giacometti-like artwork (like Genet, Beckett admired the sculptor). He stripped away ornamentation and adamantly denied actors license to stray from the simplicity of his stories, to “act” with psychological baggage or larded conceptuality. Still, Beckett was not adverse to inventiveness and spontaneity, especially when it comes to the immediacy of impromptu behavior. Improvisation is implied by the continual reference to “violence” or “violently” in the stage directions of *Waiting for Godot* and it is part of Beckett’s theatricality, or to coin Ruby Cohn’s term, “theatereality,”<sup>835</sup> where only what happens onstage matters and the acts of violence are construed spontaneously and often humorously.

Improvising is a mainstay of his art because Beckett contends that there is no meaning beyond what occurs onstage, and what occurs onstage is always ephemeral. “Little is left to tell” (445) begins his play *Ohio Impromptu* (1981), and “nothing is left to tell” (448) ends it; but *in medias res* the affairs of the actor are illuminated. Beckett balances his controlling choreography – stripping fustian directorial “meanings” – by availing his stage to the freewheeling activities of actors playing vaudeville bits and hammy routines. Richard Schechner writes that “The Pozzo/Lucky duet is made of improvised movements and set speeches,” adding that “The Gogo/Didi duet is made of set movements (they must be at this place each night and wait for Godot to come or night to fall) and improvised routines spun out of long-ago learned habits.”

This pairing, “duets,” in Schechner’s words, “links time and space, presents them as discontinuous coordinates.”<sup>836</sup> The discontinuous coordinates of

Beckett's dramas – the startling physicality of the music hall routines and the inertia of their condition – create a tipping point of motion and stasis, words and silences, over-the-top improvisation and stripped-down minimalism. Beckett's use of improvisation and stasis underlies a larger issue of meaning – or lack of meaning in the world, and this lack instigates violent reactions. The disintegration of religious or other antiquated repositories of certainty leaves a void, and the quest to fill it drives modern characters into a Sisyphean twitching, lunging, and spasmodic groping for purposes and goals. When this search fails to draw conclusions or find certainty, it induces what Herbert Blau calls “more rage.”<sup>837</sup> The back-and-forthness mirrors our living experiences of stopping and starting again, the typical Beckettian refrain “I can't go on, I will go on.”

The desire for “meaning” – and the failure to find it – is a thread that runs through the veins of modern drama. In Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, Tusenbach, in love with Irena, philosophizes about the future. He points to the birds, saying that “whatever thoughts, sublime or trivial, may drift through their heads, they'll keep on flying and never know what for or where to. They fly and will keep on flying, whatever philosopher they may hatch; and let them philosophize to their heart's content, so long as they keep on flying ...”. Masha interjects and asks, “Then what's the point,” to which Tusenbach replies: “The point ... Look, there's snow falling. What's the point of that?”<sup>838</sup> As in Beckett, pontifications are nullified and meaning annulled; the vexing “point” is that there is no point. Terry Eagleton calls attention to Chekhov's passage in comparison to Beckett, asserting that the post-holocaust, post-tragic “world of Samuel Beckett, in which things appear at once enigmatic and baldly self-identical, seems less a place which once had meaning which has now hemorrhaged away than one which calls that whole rather peculiar way of looking into question. Maybe what we call nihilism is just the wish that things had meaning in the sense that fish have gills, and the fury that they do not.”<sup>839</sup> Things and meanings are devoid of clarity beyond mere sophistry that “snow is falling” or “fish have gills.” “Modern drama has given up the idea of fate,” Kierkegaard tells us, and in this respect “emancipates itself; it observes, it looks in upon itself, takes fate up in its dramatic consciousness.”<sup>840</sup> The lack of fate indicative of God's master plan enrages characters cast adrift in meaninglessness. The vapidness causes furious reactions, as Beckett suggests. The “fury” erupts at inopportune and inappropriate moments, creating a mixture of humor and chary indignation, followed by regret and remorse, only to flash up again in violent outbursts. Beckett explicates this incomprehensible tug-of-war that distinguishes classical and modern drama, noting that “If life and death did not both present themselves to us, there would be no inscrutability. If there was only darkness, all would be clear. It is because there is not only darkness but also light that our situation becomes inexplicable.” Moral uncertainty is the modern condition. Beckett draws an example from St. Augustine's

doctrine of grace: "Two thieves are crucified with Christ, one saved and the other damned. How can we make sense of such division?" Classical drama, he says, avoids this problem because the "destiny of Racine's Phedre is sealed from the beginning: she will proceed in the dark," only to discover, at the end, "complete illumination." She may find darkness in her life, but she will comprehend it, grasp it, and accept it. Her valiant efforts, however fruitless, are recognized and acknowledged. "Within this notion clarity is possible, but for us who are neither Greek nor Jansenist there is no such clarity. The question would also be removed if we believed in the contrary – total salvation. But where we have both dark and light we have also the inexplicable. The key word in my plays is 'perhaps.'"<sup>841</sup>

Beckett's condition of inanition – human undernourished – is captured by Nietzsche's remarks: "Now mythless man stands there, surrounded by every past there has ever been, eternally hungry, scraping and digging in a search for roots, even if he has to dig for them in the most distant antiquities. The enormous historical need of dissatisfied modern culture, the accumulation of countless other cultures, the consuming desire for knowledge – what does all this point to, if not to the loss of myth, the loss of a mythical home, a mythical, maternal womb?"<sup>842</sup> This is perhaps why Beckett's characters frequently refer to religion, god, and myths, or what Ruby Cohn asserts is the "larded" plays "with biblical shards, starting with the neologism God-ot."<sup>843</sup> Beckett shares with Nietzsche the grisly relish of our intractable conditions; we are doomed no matter what decisions we make, we lust for answers that will never materialize, we are merely "passing time," as Vladimir and Estragon repeat throughout *Godot*, and even our lame attempts to cast about for spiritual icons are foolish endeavors. Beckett, writes James Joyce's biographer Richard Ellmann, "was addicted to silences,"<sup>844</sup> because, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty maintains, we must "rid our minds of the idea that our language is the translation or cipher of an original text." Once we erase this fallacy, "we shall see that the idea of *complete* expression is nonsensical, and that all language is indirect or allusive – that is, if you wish, silence. The relation of meaning to the spoken word can no longer be a point for point correspondence that we always have clearly in mind."<sup>845</sup> Or, as Ihab Hassan notes in *The Literature of Silence*, Beckett's protagonists "are metaphysical clowns and jongleurs of solipsism; but they are also morbid quietists, cripples, impotents," collectively suffering from "radical acedia."<sup>846</sup> Silence also illustrates how we listen (or don't listen), and reveals how habit threatens our capacity for risk and discovery. Language for Beckett simply assists the passage of time and nothing more. When Pozzo and Lucky depart at the end of Act One, Vladimir says, "That passed the time." Estragon: "It would have passed in any case." Vladimir: "Yes, but not so rapidly" (46), as if our wishful thinking can alter the momentum of time. Left to their own devices, the two wonder what to do next.



VLADIMIR: How they've changed.

ESTRAGON: Who?

VLADIMIR: Those two.

ESTRAGON: That's the idea, let's make a little conversation (47).

The debris of language through conversation litters the stage; nothing comes of it, yet everything changes through time and words. The Boy approaches, saying "Mister Albert," to which Vladimir replies "yes" (47). Is "Albert" Vladimir's name? It seems unlikely, yet the insignia "Albert" can be worn like an article of clothes, owned by virtue of affirmation. Speech acts can take on meaning when we call ourselves something other than what we are. Beckett's stage may be bare but words are the arsenal of survival, keeping the emptiness at bay and making meaning extempore. Probing the Boy for answers, Vladimir says, "Words, words. (*Pause*) Speak" (49), as if, like Hamlet, the "wild and whirling words" might amount to something beyond mere palaver. Each probe, stab, or lurch by his characters to find meaning is an improvised search to tear away the veil, what Beckett calls "*Un dévoilement sans fin, voile derrière voile*" ("An unveiling without end, veil behind veil, surface upon surface of imperfect transparencies, an unveiling toward what cannot be unveiled").<sup>847</sup>

Beckett and improvisation seem counterintuitive in light of his and his estate's strict imposition of rules about productions. Beckett and his heirs deny cross-gender casting or directorial conceptualizations of his dramas. The controversial 1984 production of Beckett's *Endgame* (*Fin de Partie*, 1957) at Cambridge's American Repertory Theater, in which the director JoAnne Akalaitis situated the play in a post-apocalyptic subway tunnel, stirred Beckett's animus. Akalaitis grounded *Endgame* in a real-world scenario, eschewing the play's opacity – its typical Beckettian notion of what Bert O. States calls Beckett's "generic landscapes and situations"<sup>848</sup> – giving it a kind of Stanislavskian "as if" back story to bolster and contextualize character motivation.<sup>849</sup>

Many have argued that Beckett's objection to the production, in which the play's deliberate ambiguity was transformed into a stable locale, was because it cut against the grain of his intentions. Daniel Albright, for example, makes this case, saying that "Beckett preferred his directors to reduce his meanings, not to multiply them."<sup>850</sup> Beckett doubtlessly wanted to reduce – indeed obliterate – connections to real-world conditions, insisting "on the extreme simplicity of dramatic situation and issue";<sup>851</sup> but he was not necessarily opposed to meaning *per se*. For Beckett, meaning, in theatrical terms, is the pure immediacy of the moment, what Steven Connor calls Beckett's "sheer *presence* which is given by Vladimir and Estragon," deprived "of all the conventional dramatic support of script, plot or properties."<sup>852</sup> The living existence of human interaction, the give-and-take that occurs in a theatrical setting, manifests meaning in improvisation.

Meaning for Beckett only occurs in the actuality of the theatre; *it happens during the interconnection of human beings in and through time*. “Everything is in the text,” Beckett has repeatedly said to inquiries about the meaning of his plays, which I maintain means “everything you need to know is onstage” and is perhaps why Beckett turned to directing his own works. Meaning for Beckett cannot be predetermined, nor understood *post facto*; existence precedes essence, the Existentialists habitually tell us, and for Beckett existence is in the moment. Ruby Cohn says that “On the rare occasion when Beckett speaks of his characters, he calls them ‘my people.’ Not symbols, or objects, or fictions, but *people*.”<sup>853</sup> Beckett “peoples his stage” with living interaction; to impose a “back story” is to construe the momentary ephemera narrowly and snap the threads of spontaneity. Beckett’s view is anti-form (though, as Linda Ben-Zvi reminds us, is not “formless”);<sup>854</sup> rather, Beckett is gainsaying any attempt at creating formalist frames to categorize his plays. Beckett’s friend Lawrence Harvey notes that “Beckett thinks that ‘being’ is constantly putting form into danger. He aspires, he said, to what he recognizes is the impossible task of eliminating form – not just breaking it down or working against it but eliminating it.” This is because “His vision of man is *inadequacy*. Form expresses adequacy; so it must be broken.” As a result, “The accent thus falls on the creative act as unfinished, as portraying man’s inadequacy and his flawed nature.” Only when we invite chaos and sometimes violence, which is part and parcel of the improvisatory and always unfinished theatrical experience, can we truly find authenticity. “If anything new and exciting is going on today,” Beckett told Harvey, it is “the attempt to let being into art [and] to let in chaos and what is not ordered.”<sup>855</sup>

Theatre, for Beckett, is chaos – the location where meaning is made and dissolved, only to be remade and re-dissolved, in the immediate act of people *interacting*. It is human communication, or lack of it, that interests Beckett. Alain Robbe-Grillet observed this in 1953, while watching the first production of *Godot*. The play’s major function as a theatrical representation is “to show of what the fact of *being there* consists.” Being there, in Beckett’s plays, means “everything happens as if the two tramps were on stage *without having a role*.” They are improvising; “they do not seem to have a text prepared beforehand and scrupulously learned by heart, to support them. They must invent.”<sup>856</sup> Beckett’s plays are about human interfacing, interacting, inventing, recreating, reimagining, and regrouping, where meaning can only occur in the presence of another, and through relationships the other changes who we are continuously. The purely ephemeral nature of theatre elucidates our momentary existence; “liveness,” Philip Auslander’s term for the theatrical convention distinct from other media, is here enacted in Beckett’s plays at its most essential.<sup>857</sup> Albright argues that *Endgame* (or any of Beckett’s plays) must “not make sense; any rationalization of the actions illustrated in the play must seem flimsy; there

must be a tension between the familiar sort of discourse spoken by the characters and the preposterous *donnée* – that is, the tension between language and spectacle. The dialogue must not seem a response to the situation, but a continuous aberration of it.”<sup>858</sup> This tension and aberration derive from improvisatory behavior, from actors reacting and clowning, presenting differing relationships from one performance to another. Writing in the *San Quentin News*, a paper produced by the California State Penitentiary where the play received its American success, the staff writer C. Banman wrote of *Godot* that it was an expression “by an author who expects each member of his audience to draw his own conclusions, make his own errors. It asked nothing in point, it forced no dramatized moral on the viewer, it held out no specific hope.”<sup>859</sup> Beckett reveals some of his attempt to get at the root of meaning, not the mimetic version which reflects a reality already gone, but the essential, authentic “thing-ness” of being, which is expressed in the following letter:

There is a kind of writing corresponding with acts of fraud & debauchery on the part of the writing-shed. The moan I have more & more to make with mine is there – that it is nearly all trigged up, in terrain, *faute d’orifice*, heat of friction and not the spontaneous combustion of the spirit to compensate the pus & the pain that threatens its economy, fraudulent maneuvers to make the cavity do what it can’t do – the work of the abscess. [...] I’m in mourning for the integrity of a pendu’s [hanging] emission of semen, what I find in Homer & Dante & Racine & sometimes Rimbaud, the integrity of the eyelids coming down before the brain knows of grit in the wind.<sup>860</sup>

The passage typifies Beckett’s capacious literary references, bodily excretion metaphors, and language limitations. “Words fail us,” Mrs. W says in one of Beckett’s earliest fragments, *Human Wishes*, because words are inadequate in modernism.<sup>861</sup> Only what is present matters: Beckett is trying to connect the meaning of the theatrical event to the moment it lives; this is why he encodes improvisation and accentuates violence, not because he is anti-theatrical, as some have proposed, but rather the opposite: he celebrates the theatrical, the clown, circus, music hall, and actor – in sum, the chaos and anarchy of the theatrical moment. Writing on Giambattista Vico, Beckett says what could be construed as his explanation for improvisatory drama: “His writing is not about something; it is that something itself,” adding: “When the sense is sleep, the words go to sleep. [...] When the sense is dancing, the words dance.”<sup>862</sup> It is not an improvisation of past circumstances, but an improvisation of the senses connected to the living moment onstage. Beckett’s modernism, writes Tyrus Miller, ramifies through his efforts to “concentrate firmly on the world to be disclosed within the work of art, not on some part of the world he might reflect, in a conventionalized mimesis.”<sup>863</sup> Instead of gaining interpretative

ground, connecting the dots to some one-to-one real-world circumstance, he is trying to create a play where it is no longer possible to separate the actor from the play. However elusive Beckett's work might be, in the "other side" of his work, things, Terry Eagleton says, are "brutally themselves," where "the world is whatever is the case, the artist who is fascinated by the sheer inert materiality of objects like pebbles or bowler hats."<sup>864</sup>

This is because for Beckett everything, even language itself, is relational and economical. "Language is forever unwords," notes Lois Oppenheim, because the improvisatory nature of acting situates meaning in a fluid baseline, a fungible realm of creation, recreation, and ephemera. The point of what Oppenheim calls Beckett's "Textual fragmentation or deconstruction *as a creative process*" reflects theatre's spontaneity.<sup>865</sup> Beckett's words' — "spontaneous combustion of creativity" — must first erase the excesses, the pus and mess of excretion which for Beckett signifies the over-determined and over-exegetical meanings, the need to ground the creative act that prevents it from flying, transforming, and re-creating itself in interpersonal relationships. We relate, to take one example, through perception: how do we share in seeing? Note the following exchange near the conclusion of *Waiting for Godot*:

ESTRAGON: Look at the little cloud.

VLADIMIR: (*Raising his eyes*) Where?

ESTRAGON: There. In the zenith.

VLADIMIR: Well? (*Pause*). What is there so wonderful about it?

ESTRAGON: Let's pass on now to something else, do you mind? (78).

There is a vision shared, an ocularcentric coordinate between two people trying to reach across the void. The Vladimir-Estragon etude above could contain a myriad of possible relationships: spouse, sibling, colleague, friend, cellmate, or other links. But one thing is certain from the exchange: intimacy. There is a freedom and camaraderie — a familiarity that breeds love and contempt — in the language that can only derive from years of togetherness, resulting in an improvisatory fluidity. If, perhaps, Estragon had not said "Let's pass on now to something else" then the exchange might suggest strangers. But the final edginess that comes with the confidence to say something rude, sarcastic, and presumptuous ("What is there so wonderful about it?") without fear that the recipient will depart implies the inexorable and indivisible bond between Vladimir and Estragon. They are improvising as only those with intimate knowledge of each other can. "All of Beckett's pairs," Michael Worton contends, "are bound in friendships that are essentially power-relationships." Yet despite the jockeying and one-upmanship, at root "each partner needs to know that the other is there: the partners provide proof that they really exist by responding and replying to each other."<sup>866</sup> The camaraderie, with its familiarity

that breeds contempt and ultimate failure to communicate, is the root of Beckett's impromptu drama.

Born into a comfortable middle-class Dublin family of Protestant upbringing, Beckett (1906–1989, Nobel Prize in 1969) became fluent in French and Italian at Trinity College, immersed himself in Proust, Gide, Racine, and began his career as a literary scholar. His discomfort with lecturing, resulting partly from an almost pathological shyness, prompted him to abandon teaching. Beckett's creative development arose from the cross-pollination that is often associated with several artistic evolutions. According to Derek Mahon, "He belonged, with Thomas MacCreevy and Denis Devlin, to the 1930s generation of Irish poets, and shared their fractured modernist aesthetic of non religious convictions."<sup>867</sup> Colin Tóibín notes several events that molded his ideas: undergoing psychotherapy in London during the mid-1930s and attending lectures by Jung; as well as "reading the central texts in the debate around ideas of being and nonbeing, nonconsciousness, and nonlanguage."<sup>868</sup> Among the key philosophers was Schopenhauer, who opened up for Beckett the folly of human strivings. In 1937, Beckett wrote that "the only thing I could read was Schopenhauer," adding: "I always knew he was one of the ones that mattered most to me, and it is a pleasure more real than any pleasure for a long time to begin to understand now why it is so. And it is a pleasure also to find a philosopher that can be read like a poet."<sup>869</sup> Beckett was moved by Schopenhauer's anti-rational challenge to the Enlightenment notion of *Akrasia*, which Honi Haber describes as "the ability to act according to rational judgment to which we sincerely assent and of which we are in full knowledge." Rational judgment is blocked by desire, which "poses a threat to unity of self," and this "inability to incorporate our desires with our reasoned judgment blocks the road to self-interpretation."<sup>870</sup> Beckett follows Schopenhauer's dictum that a character is not driven by reason (as much as he or she might try), but by will that is eroded by time. All strivings are a groping for possession, ownership, and absorption into our being, but ultimately we "worship an obscure and implacable Goddess," Beckett says, making "sacrifices" before her, and "the Goddess who requires this sacrifice and this humiliation, whose sole condition of patronage is corruptibility, and into whose faith and worship all mankind is born, is the Goddess of Time."<sup>871</sup> As Hamm says, echoing Schopenhauer, in *Endgame*: "One day you'll be blind, like me. You'll be sitting there, a speck in the void, in the dark, for ever, like me. [...] Infinite emptiness will be all around you, all the resurrected dead of all the ages wouldn't fill it, and there you'll be like a little bit of grit in the middle of the steppe" (109–10).

Beckett's experience in French literature, especially Racine, inspired what Harold Bloom calls his "awesome economy."<sup>872</sup> "What interested Beckett above all in Racine's plays," writes Bridgette Le Juez, "is that little happens."<sup>873</sup> His "Protestant animus against the superfluous and ornamental," Terry

Eagleton adds, also contributed to his lack of embellishment.<sup>874</sup> But there is more than minimalism to Racine's influence: Beckett's thought coincided with Racine's Jansenism, the idea that humanity is affixed to a "middle sphere," what Richard Goodkin calls "the unbearable feeling of being in a middle state as unacceptable as it is irremediated," forcing humanity "to feel the existence of two extremes, but allows it to do nothing to reconcile them." Humanity is thus "poised above a treacherous void, a situation which the Jansenists exacerbate by reducing the mediating capabilities of the clergy and placing man, unprotected, at the mercy of a severe and judging divinity."<sup>875</sup> The vacuum is created by an abandoning God, yet even in "His" absence we are still subject to strict moral judgments that force humanity to make overwhelming choices; we are left to our own devices to negotiate a moral code devoid of a final arbiter, finding no mediation between what we do and what we think.

Additionally, Racine, Proust, and to some degree Rimbaud thought inductively, from the particular to the general, dwelling on the minutiae of quotidian life. The music hall vaudeville routines of Laurel and Hardy, Charlie Chaplin, and the Marx Brothers were, in many ways, the main source of comedic impetus, and for these film comedians simplicity and clarity of actions enabled us to perceive humor. The slapstick routines and impromptu vaudeville shticks in his plays reflect Beckett's enthusiasm for such unadorned mayhem, and also a link to Racine and Proust: for the vaudeville comics raise a ruckus with minutiae in the same way as Proust does with a pair of shoes, the only difference being that where the comic makes light of the object, Proust sees darkness. Additionally Beckett was influenced by his mentor, James Joyce. But for Beckett Joyce's novels were rigid, lacking the theatrical and improvisatory that can free the artist's hand. In a 1956 interview, Beckett compared his work with Joyce, saying that his mentor "was a superb manipulator of material." By contrast, Beckett said of himself that he was "not master of my material." While Joyce tended towards "omniscience and omnipotence as an artist," Beckett worked with "impotence, ignorance." Instead of "expression as an achievement," Beckett sees "My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable – as something by definition incompatible with art."<sup>876</sup> The discarded miscellany and incompatibility of humanity became the foundation of Beckett's drama.

### *Waiting for Godot*

It's difficult to imagine now the impact that Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* had on the artistic and intellectual community of the 1950s. Beckett's *succès d'estime* betokened an important new voice, though at its initial openings in Paris and Miami few recognized anything significant. *Godot's* incubus began in the late

1940s, and was likely inspired by several sources: Casper David Friedrich's painting *Mann und Frau den Mond betrachtend* (*Man and Woman Observing the Moon*, 1924); St. Augustine's remarks, "Do not despair, one of the thieves was saved; do not presume, one of the thieves was damned"; the Irish world of tinkers and beggars, notably from the works of John Millington Synge (whom Beckett admired); and the consequences of the Holocaust, which Beckett witnessed firsthand during the occupation. Finally, according to Beckett's biographer, James Knowlson, "Beckett used the fundamental fact that, in his own words to me, 'all theatre is waiting,' to create a central situation in which boredom and the avoidance of boredom are key elements in preserving dramatic tension of an unusual kind."<sup>877</sup> Harold Hobson summarizes the impact of Beckett's work in English. *Waiting for Godot*, he says, "knocked the shackles of plot from off the English drama. It destroyed the notion that the dramatist is God, knowing everything about his characters and master of a complete philosophy answerable to all of our problems."<sup>878</sup>

In the play Vladimir and Estragon await the arrival of someone named Godot. No one is certain who Godot is, any more than we know what is in Willy Loman's suitcase. In the interim the pair share stories, consider suicide, eat, pontificate, bicker, make up, bicker again, express affection, and repeat the same thing in Act Two. In both Acts Pozzo and Lucky pass through like two visiting neighbors. Vladimir and Estragon endure the Sisyphean pseudo-task of waiting. This is born out even more strongly in the French title, *En attendant Godot* (*While Waiting for Godot*) which, as Bert States attests, "puts the emphasis squarely where it belongs (and where the English title does not): on the interim rather than on the expectation; not the act of waiting *for* something but the activity of waiting itself, in all its existential and spiritual dimensions."<sup>879</sup> The action taking place on a pseudo-lunar landscape is fundamentally anti-action; like Chekhov, nothing happens, yet a great deal happens: actions are discussed, encounters occur with two stragglers twice, and a Boy arrives, twice, to announce that Godot will fail to arrive, again. Boredom consumes the characters, and boredom, writes the philosopher E. M. Cioran, "will reveal two things to us: our body and the nothingness of the world." Boredom is the opposite extreme of living. "Life," Cioran notes, "is our solution to boredom. Melancholy, sadness, despair, terror, and ecstasy grow out of boredom's thick trunk."<sup>880</sup> Forced to resist the boredom of waiting, the two tramps look for ways to entertain each other, and in turn, the audience.

Boredom for Beckett, likewise Chekhov, is the fundamental conceit of his dramas and the main condition of modern existence. According to Joshua Foa Dienstag, boredom "is a particularly modern contagion, one of the long-term effects of linear time." Boredom, like laughter and self-consciousness, is a uniquely human quality, though Dienstag adds, "it is not so much that we have a special capacity for tedium, but rather that we are able to feel our

continuous existence in time; boredom is simply one of the consequences of this. Since boredom springs from this fundamental attribute of self-consciousness, it is effectively the baseline mental condition from which we can only be distracted, either by pain or by relentless activity.”<sup>881</sup> Time looms large in the works of Samuel Beckett because space has essentially dissolved. The fallow landscape is a bare tree; the stage is devoid of parlor room accoutrement typically found in modern drama; and the arid terrain lacks growth, water, foliage, garden, or anything resembling sustenance. Eating becomes part of their rituals, with meager offerings of carrots and turnips. For Vladimir and Estragon, the place is the same as yesterday, and the day before that. Yesterday, Samuel Beckett writes, “is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday.”<sup>882</sup> Space has stopped, but time doesn’t: “Time has stopped,” Vladimir intones in *Godot*, to which the corpulent Pozzo (shades of Falstaff) replies: “Don’t you believe it, sir, don’t you believe it” (36).

In the run up to time’s inevitable pace, which is ultimately our death, we fill it with language: idle talk, chit-chat, he said-she said, gossip, turning the mundane into the sacrosanct, and the holy into the ordinary. In *Godot*, the verbal puns and quibbles, pauses and hesitations, ellipses and immobility demonstrate that equivocation (essentially hemming and hawing – “buying time”) is the only linguistic instrument left in a disintegrated world. The excessive repetition, dislocation, and confusion in Beckett’s language are likened to a condition of primal chaos: the word and world share the same suffering inertia. Vladimir and Estragon are like Hamlet in this, immobilized by the abundant possibilities of choices and the crippling equivocal wavering. Language for Beckett is both the revealer of truth and the enemy of certainty; it helps us define who we are and it blurs knowledge. In 1937 Beckett expressed the desire “to bore one hole after another in it [language] until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today.”<sup>883</sup> Beckett is tracking down the clichés and allegories we live by, holding them up for view, deciphering which ones are useful and which ones are not, taking nothing for granted. Most of the allegories we find in literature or art, Erich Auerbach tells us, “represent a virtue (e.g., wisdom), or a passion (jealousy), an institution (justice), or at most a very general synthesis of historical phenomena (peace, the fatherland)” yet “never a definite event in its full historicity.”<sup>884</sup> Allegory can only tell a partial story; the rest, as Shakespeare says, is silence. Beckett seems to comply with this view, saying “for the time being we must be satisfied with little. At first it can only be a matter of somehow finding a method by which we can represent this mocking attitude towards the word, through words. In this dissonance between the



means and their use it will perhaps become possible to feel a whisper of that final music or that silence that underlies All.”<sup>885</sup>

What Vladimir and Estragon have is each other, their union and perseverance the core towing the play’s emotional meaning. Whether or not they are what Norman Mailer calls “a male and female homosexual,” they are, as Mailer observes, two vagabonds, “old and exhausted, [having] come to rest temporarily on a timeless plain, presided over by a withered cross-like tree, marooned in the purgatory of their failing powers.”<sup>886</sup> They cajole, critique, reject, and rejoin; their bonding is the improvisatory nature of the play. They can only exist when *embodied by two actors*. Their past is nonexistent, or at least incapable of being remembered; and their future is *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose* (the more things change, the more they remain the same), or what Clov says in *Endgame*: “All life long the same questions, the same answers” (94). Only in their present moment are they alive, and only *in relationship* do they exist. Their consciousness (and ours as spectators) is oriented towards meaning, but we can only come into existence through the meaning which is revealed in the process of meaning-creation. The world for Vladimir and Estragon arises for them in response to their fears and aspirations, and the only way we can understand their primordial anxieties and strivings is not in terms of a past history or a future goal, but rather by imaginatively completing patterns of meaning in which their presence has been given to us. “Lacking a social history or identity,” Lois Gordon posits, Vladimir and Estragon “stand before us asking to be understood, as they themselves try to understand, and they exist, as we respond to them, in a context of virtual absence and its correlative, endless potentiality. Standing on a road that similarly lacks definition in that it goes toward and has descended from nowhere, they define themselves in their relationship to one another and with roles so well scripted that each is the other’s audience: each gives validation to the other’s existence.”<sup>887</sup> Their encounter with the bully Pozzo and his lackey named (ironically) Lucky is fleeting and pell-mell, and when they leave Vladimir and Estragon try to recall if they had seen these two before. They suffer from prosopagnosia, face blindness, an inability to distinguish features and names. “Is it Pozzo or Bozzo,” Vladimir inquires, while Estragon seems to swoon, “Pozzo ... no ... I’m afraid I ... no ... I don’t seem to ... (*Pozzo advances threateningly*). Vladimir: (*conciliating*) I once knew a family called Gozzo. The mother had the clap” (23–4). Vladimir covers for his friend, hides Estragon’s infirmity and lack of spleen. When Pozzo inquires who is this “Godot,” both Vladimir and Estragon evade, creating a modicum of intrigue. But it is not long before we realize that there is no Godot, no reward at the end of the wait, only what H. Porter Abbott calls the “trope of onwardness” that undermines any moral imperative.<sup>888</sup>

If the plot is a cauldron in which the characters are held together by their symbiosis, the toxic proximity is also reflective of excessive intimacy. Vladimir

and Estragon grow annoyed with each other, threaten to leave, acting like long-term spouses involved in toothless arguments. The characters vent their spleen and act out their insecurities on each other, two sounding boards of verbal cruelty. The play probes an array of life's fillips and adversities: the tricks of memory that soothe our daily existence; the brash decisions and subsequent regrets of our youthful exuberance and indiscretion; the continuing need for forgiveness; and (like the Japanese story of *Rashomon*) the way a single event can be subjected to many interpretations. The past fragments for these two tramps because their recollection has faded; they are no longer certain of what actually happened before; and the experience of sameness robs reality of its distinguishing features. "Try and remember" (61), Vladimir says; like two figures in a long-term relationship, Vladimir and Estragon try to recall the events of yesterday:

VLADIMIR: (*Letting go the leg*) Where are your boots?

ESTRAGON: I must have thrown them away.

VLADIMIR: When?

ESTRAGON: I don't know.

VLADIMIR: Why?

ESTRAGON: (*Exasperated*) I don't know why I don't know!

VLADIMIR: No, I mean why did you throw them away?

ESTRAGON: (*Exasperated*) Because they were hurting me! (62)

Beckett's understanding of violence is shaped by his knowledge of the violent nature of intimacy. The violence in *Godot* – the beatings, for instance – is always sudden and surprising, offstage yet unmistakable, and his characters are terrorized by violence and the threat of violence. Pozzo's cruelty to Lucky is the most obvious, the beatings in the ditch every night and the beatings that the Boy's brother endures are also revealing innuendoes, but the very tension of waiting in itself is a violent disregard for the dignity of the two tramps. By the second act more violence: Lucky mute, Pozzo blind, and time itself is the culprit, violently wearing us down rhythmically, ceaselessly, unstoppably: "Pozzo: (*suddenly furious*) Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day like any other day, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll all go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you?" (83). Compare this to Schopenhauer's dictum: "Not the least of the torments which plague our existence is the constant pressure of *time*, which never lets us so much as draw breath but pursues us all like a taskmaster with a whip. It ceases to persecute only him it has delivered over to boredom."<sup>889</sup> And Lucky's turgid, pompously academic tirade in the first act, is, in a vertiginously nonsensical way, a psychological pastiche of decadent bourgeois and convoluted unintelligibility

that pummels its listeners, numbing any ability to respond. “As the words tumble forth in an increased frenzy,” writes David Grossvogel, “the convulsive thought becomes a chaotic landscape of a lifelessness and stones within which Lucky’s stream is eventually spent, running dry on the word ‘unfinished.’”<sup>890</sup> The word unfinished threatens us with more of the same, boredom itself bearing down on us mercilessly.

Beckett’s device of repetition or echolalia – characters repeating what they hear and trying to make sense of it by firing back at the first speaker – posits at first a visionary hypothesis, an initial suggestion of metaphysical or theological significance by one character, contradicted by a responding second character who advances a supposed superior explanation that is either trivial or reassuring but hardly truer than the first. It is the repartee of the comic, an Abbott and Costello “Who’s on First” exchange that spirals down the slippery slope of onomatopoeia and double entendre, where sounds take hold of meanings relating now only as sounds, and “instant forgetfulness,”<sup>891</sup> says A. Alvarez, keeps the dialogue going. For Beckett, in each instance, the replay – the second speaker questioning or repeating the first – stalls the action, leaving the first speaker hopelessly stranded in a morass of contradictory logic, spinning backwards into chaos like a frustrated Oliver Hardy, who famously repeats in every movie when his partner Stan Laurel errs: “This is another nice mess you’ve got me into, Stanley.” This would seem the ultimate condition of modernism – certainty and pontification become, at second or third glance, derelict and unsustainable, with only mistakes and chaos in their wake.

Beckett illuminates the abyss of nothingness, the endless void that is thought to be mediated by desire. As he writes in *Text for Nothing*, “Suddenly, no, at last, long last, I couldn’t any more, I couldn’t go on. Someone said, You can’t stay here. I couldn’t stay there and I couldn’t go on.”<sup>892</sup> Though he studied Descartes, Beckett ultimately rejects the Cartesian belief in the primacy of the intellect and reason, abhorring the optimism of Hegelian forward progress of history and human society and ridiculing the solipsism of Cartesian thought.<sup>893</sup> John Fletcher maintains that “In Beckettian as in Cartesian man, the body is utterly distinct from the mind and the mind is free to ignore the body’s mishaps with the serenity of one who knows that they occur as it were on another planet.”<sup>894</sup> This makes sense if we consider his characters in isolation, and perhaps fits well with his novels; but in drama with Beckett we are with other people, bodies circling each other endlessly and getting nowhere. The themes that lie “at the heart of Beckett’s thought,” writes Lawrence Harvey, are “man’s utter inability to know – God, the world, others, himself.”<sup>895</sup> The Cartesian legacy of reason, in Ihab Hassan’s words, “has withered,” and the rational method of understanding “has become a glorious scarecrow in the fields of thought.”<sup>896</sup> Epistemological enigmas, however, do not mean we stop trying to know; futility is the root of the human condition, but the

struggle to improvise our way out of the void goes on. Beckett adopted Schopenhauer's theme of an endless circling for something unnamable, craving and groping after that mysterious goal which once obtained loses its luster. "Altogether," Schopenhauer says, "every human life flows on between willing and achieving," yielding desire as "pain," where "achievement gives quick birth to satiation." Desire yields two paths: achievement, which, like an addict, needs more achievement; or lack of achievement, which "follows desolation, emptiness, boredom." In the end, "The ceaseless efforts to banish suffering accomplish nothing beyond altering its form."<sup>897</sup> We face inner doubt and must admit that living leads to an existence full of irreconcilable contradictions. For Beckett, we cannot ignore the reality of the body, that most profound and universal reality, which eventuates in mental disintegration and physical pain. This is why his dramas, as he progressed in his work, acknowledge the disintegrating body, whether in a mound, or turning to just a voice recorded on a tape machine with no "character" as such to embody. Suicide is one way out of this mess; but as Terry Eagleton notes, for Beckett's "eviscerating" characters, "death would be far too definitive, too grandiose an event to be coped with; even suicide requires more agency than they are capable of mustering. You have to have some sense of identity in order to abandon it."<sup>898</sup>

In *Waiting for Godot*, every act nullifies any causal connection to the prior act and its linear results. Time moves relentlessly and yet its sameness blurs its edges and obscures its meaning. The state of Vladimir and Estragon's time consciousness, writes Bert States, is "constantly rising toward the future (expectation) and falling into the past (memory), with no repose in a *now*. With the arrival of Pozzo and Lucky on each day it is momentarily exposed to an event of passing time, an extended *now*, that is in dramatic counterpoint to 'waiting.'<sup>899</sup> In each crepuscular reappearance of the protagonists at this designated waiting ground the sameness wears them down, and each time they are bolstered and energized by the appearance of the other. The "need" for the other is both necessary and repulsive; at last there is nothing but the other. Robert Weimann notes that "the loss of temporal dimension means the destruction of the specific narrative effect, namely, the representation of temporal processes," yielding "the ideological negation of self-transforming reality, the negation of the historicity of our world."<sup>900</sup> When temporal dimensions break down, history loses its moorings. There is no history for Vladimir and Estragon, despite their efforts to piece together the fragments of their past, only an "extended now-time." This appears tragic, defeatist, reminiscent of King Lear amidst the storm (as Jan Kott reminds us),<sup>901</sup> but Beckett will have no truck with tragic emblems; such pretentiousness has no place in his world view. The final speech by Vladimir in Act Two, just prior to the arrival of the Boy for a second time, is as close to the tragic as Beckett ventures. Vladimir says:

Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? That with Estragon my friend, at this place until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be? (*Estragon, having struggled with his boots in vain, is dozing off again. Vladimir stare at him*). He'll know nothing. He'll tell me about the blows he received and I'll give him a carrot. (*Pause*) Astride the grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the gravedigger puts on his forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. (*He listens*). But habit is a great deadener. (*He looks again at Estragon*) (84).

Vladimir's quixotic stab at meaning is balanced by the sleeping (snoring?) Estragon. The downplaying of the tragic is in the juxtaposition of Estragon sleeping, denuding, and simultaneously elevating, the tragic pathos. Horror is accentuated when juxtaposed with the ridiculous (think of Shakespeare's Porter speech in *Macbeth* – the drunken janitor railing against the knocking immediately following the murder *adds* to the grotesque). Beckett insisted, in the first production, that Estragon's pants fall to his ankles. In the "laughter," he says in a letter to his director Roger Blin, "which could greet the complete fall [of his pants], there is nothing to object to in the great gift of a touching final tableau." He justified this juxtapositioning by saying "The spirit of the play to the extent to which it has one, is that nothing is more grotesque than the tragic. One must express it up to the end, and especially the end."<sup>902</sup> Though he never says this outright, Beckett wants to eradicate the lofty position of tragedy and the tragic poet by remaining faithful to the pathos and gruesomeness found in Büchner's *Woyzeck* centuries before. He develops his character in the way he describes Proust: "He will write as he has lived – in Time." Making a distinction between classicism and Proust's modernism, he says, "The classical artist assumes omniscience and omnipotence. He raises himself artificially out of Time in order to give relief to his chronology and causality to his development." Whereas, "Proust's chronology is extremely difficult to follow, the succession of events spasmodic, and his characters and themes, although they seem to obey an almost insane inward necessity, are presented and developed with a fine Dostoevskian contempt for the vulgarity of a plausible concatenation."<sup>903</sup> What is left is each other, the nearness of another, and the enduring crucible of living amongst another.

Beckett's extraordinary feat of blending pathos and comedy is accomplished by the relationship of the main characters who are, despite their bloviated portentousness and inane banter, filled with enormous charm. They are hilarious as they are tragic, exquisite amalgams of clownishness and grandeur. They can be pompous and stubborn, yet just as quickly brought down to earth with humility and despair. The vicissitudes of their behavior are seductive, remorseless, enduring, and culled out in a vortex of endless waiting. Their

efforts to evade the purpose of their life are summed up by Anthony Uhlmann, who contends that “Beckett draws startling conclusions that, because the essence of an object is to elude representation, no object can be represented: that all one can attempt is to describe the process of evasion.”<sup>904</sup> Vladimir and Estragon are marooned in a vapid place, lacking safe havens and neutral corners; like weary prizefighters, all they can do is evade, duck, parry – and hug. They may withdraw into silence, reevaluating their positions, and reload for more intellectual combat and slapstick; but they never leave each other, never withdrawing from the stage, and in their loyalty we find the gold nugget of compassion.

### *Endgame*

The patterns of *Godot* reappear in Beckett’s one-act *Endgame*. Two characters, Hamm and Clov, are bound together by need and habit; two passers-by, this time the parents of Hamm, Nagg and Nell, arise from trash cans affixed at the edges of the stage. Hamm, blind and ensconced in his chair center stage, is irascible, hypercritical, fastidious, impatient, anti-social, and agoraphobic; the etiolated Clov moves about fastidiously, compulsively – he cannot sit – and is Hamm’s dependable “servant.” The appellation “Ham” is a Biblical allusion to “the accursed son of Noah.”<sup>905</sup> The allusion to chess is also self-evident; the “king” sits on his throne as other pieces move about protecting him.<sup>906</sup> Like *Waiting for Godot*, the enervated duo anticipate one another’s best lines; fill out or overturn each other’s half finished sentences; and answer what is implied rather than simply what is said. There are no revelations or epiphanies; Beckett mocks such pretensions:

HAMM: Clov!

CLOV: (*Impatiently*) What is it?

HAMM: We’re not beginning to ... to ... mean something?

CLOV: Mean something! You and I, mean something! (*Brief laugh*) Ah, that’s a good one! (107–8)

*Endgame* does not evoke as much humor; there is far less slapstick and mayhem than *Godot*; the garbage cans, albeit funny at first sight, begin to diminish in humor as one of the parental characters dies; and as Ruby Cohn contends, the play “is swathed in pain.”<sup>907</sup> Beckett said that *Endgame* is “rather difficult and elliptic, mostly dependent on the power of the text to claw, more inhuman than *Godot*.”<sup>908</sup> The world outside obliterated, the world inside barren. In *Endgame*, Martin Esslin observes, we are “confronted with a very powerful expression of the sense of deadness, of leaden heaviness and hopelessness, that is experienced in states of deep depression: the world outside goes dead for the

victim of such states, but inside his mind there is ceaseless argument between parts of his personality that have become autonomous entities.”<sup>99</sup>

Whereas *Godot* is freewheeling, with wistful relationships loosely bound together, *Endgame* reflects a conventional “family” unit and is more apocalyptic. The two “parents” in the dustbins are the wizened and “Accursed progenitor” (96), Hamm says, calling Nagg the “Accursed fornicator!” (96) who rests on his “stumps.” Nagg and Nell speak in childish drivel, try to embrace over their encasements (trash barrels), munch on dry biscuits, and vaguely recollect their youth in Lake Como. Their decrepitude is the manifestation of their dotage. It can be suggested that Clov is either Hamm’s son, or his brother. Hamm asks Clov: “Do you remember your father?” Clov equivocates, saying: “You’ve asked me these questions a million times.” Hamm’s woozy mix of subjects (“It” and “I”) obscurely retorts:

HAMM: It was I was a father to you.

CLOV: Yes. (*He looks at Hamm fixedly*). You were that to me.

HAMM: My house a home for you.

CLOV: Yes. (*He looks about him*). That was that for me (110)

The relationship may be opaque, but what can be ascertained is the preternatural link between Clov and Hamm, their musical rhythms repeating each other as in the familial exchange above. Doubtless their relationship is deliberately vague; Wolfgang Iser avers that “If the rules of *Endgame* have to be projected onto it by the spectator, then clearly the text itself cannot establish that any one of the possibilities is the correct one.” Since choosing one interpretation cancels out another, the process of absorbing the play is a continual affirmation and negation of meaning; *Endgame*, Iser says, “compels the spectator to reject the ‘meaning’ it stimulates, and in this way conveys something of the ‘unendingness’ of the end and the nature of the fictions which we are continually fabricating in order to finish off the end or to close the gaps in our experiences.”<sup>10</sup> To impose a fixed meaning to the story is for Beckett barking up the wrong tree. We are in the theatre, where artifice and play-acting are the convention by which we create meaning through the interaction of the actors performing Hamm and Clov. A contextualization is unnecessary because the context is already there in the actions, behavior, and interfacing of two people who reflect familial bonding without fixed family relationships. It is not so much that the play lacks closure, but rather the play is a process of closing and opening: like a series of snapshots, we piece together, montage-like, meanings that have to be revived when a new photo appears. At the risk of oversimplification, with Beckett “what you see is what you get,” and what you “get” is intimacy and caring.

Interchanged memory, shared vision, and referenced imagery are interconnected in this play through the nexus of caring. Clov cares for Hamm; Hamm

cares for his parents, or at least keeps them around; and Nagg and Nell care for each other. When Nell says to Nagg, “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness,” Nagg is “*shocked*” and retorts with a simple “Oh.” Nell explains: “Yes, yes, it’s the most comical thing in the world. And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it’s always the same. Yes, it’s like a funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don’t laugh anymore” (101). Memory morphs humor into sanguine repose; shared stories linger, eviscerated of their originary purpose but still cling nonetheless. All that is left is to care, and even there the caring is mixed with habit – we don’t know what else to do. Care and memory are inexorably linked, one propping up the other. In *The Ethics of Memory*, Avishai Margalit contends that shared memory is an essential feature of human interaction, whereby he stresses “the importance of the past. When we care about another, we find it natural to expect the other to be one with whom we share a common past and common memories.”<sup>91</sup> Yet in *Endgame*, the memory of what is shared – and the reason for sharing – fades. All that remains is the bond itself.

Hamm is blind, unable to move, and wholly dependent on Clov. Clov, who cannot sit, attends to Hamm. Beckett said that Hamm “is a king in this chess game lost from the start.” He “makes a few senseless moves as only a good player would. A good one would have given up long ago. He is only trying to delay the inevitable end.” Though he may be moving by rote, he retains his dignity by saying, in Beckett’s words, “No to Nothingness.” Beckett reported in another rehearsal that “There are no accidents in *Fin de Partie* [*Endgame*]. Everything is based on analogy and repetition.”<sup>92</sup> It is also based on imagery: since Hamm is blind, he depends on Clov to “see” on his behalf. Clov peers through the window, informing Hamm of the nothingness outside. But more than mere facts, Hamm and Clov are bound through the play by the idea of imagery; Clov’s reportage is the fundamental link and all that they have together. The rest are inanimate objects (fake dog, for instance, or the whistle Hamm throws at the auditorium). At the conclusion of the play, Clov stands with his suitcase packed, while Hamm unfolds his handkerchief, spreads it out, and repeats the self-describing phrase he raised at the opening.

HAMM: Old stancher! (Pause) You ... remain.

(Pause. He covers his face with his handkerchief, lowers his arms to armrest, remains motionless.) (Brief tableau.) (134)

The closing is anticipated by Beckett’s first full-length play, *Eleuthéria*, which ends with the protagonist getting into bed, “his scrawny back turned on mankind.”<sup>93</sup> These tableaux and images are essential to Beckett, where words fail to describe conditions. John Pilling refers to the play’s meta-theatricality as an essential “liberation of the image,” where the need to create “lapses” away,



the only interruption being the need to create all over again in the next performance.<sup>914</sup> The play is starkly visual, with Hamm situated center stage, two ash cans on the side, and Clov moving about. In the end Hamm remains in his wheelchair, uncertain if Clov will actually leave, and Clov is ambivalent; both exist in what Enoch Brater calls their “agonizing ‘presentness.’”<sup>915</sup> Unlike his parents stuffed in ash cans (coffins?), Hamm remains vulnerable and visible. A hallmark of modernism is that however much we try to reach across the barrier and connect to one another, we fail to communicate. Still, we try, however fruitlessly. According to Shane Weller, “Nell’s impassivity, her blindness, is the sign of a flight into a world from which Nagg’s aggressively forced laughter is excluded, a world of the past in which the purity of the lake’s bed (‘so white’) is itself the sign of a death to which her laughter, prompted (she insists) by happiness, might have carried them.”<sup>916</sup> The operative word is “might,” the missed opportunity and memory’s vaguery that haunt all of Beckett’s characters. The humor will be telling in the case of Winnie, Beckett’s eternal bonhomie in *Happy Days*. The fulgurating pain of loneliness emerges in shrieks of unlikely laughter.

In Beckett, Theodor Adorno contends, “Thoughts are dragged along and distorted, like the residue of waking life in dreams,” making any interpretations “awkward.” All the Aristotelian requirements of drama, “Exposition, complication, plot, peripeteia, and catastrophe return in decomposed form as participants in an examination of the dramaturgical corpse.” *Endgame*, in particular, Adorno says, “performs a test-tube study on the drama of the age, a drama that no longer tolerates any of its constituents.” The language of drama itself is transformed into absurdity, “following the ritual of the clown, whose babbling becomes nonsense by being presented as sense. The objective decay of language, that bilge of self-alienation, at once stereotyped and defective, which human beings’ words and sentences have swollen up into within their own mouths, penetrates the aesthetic arcanum.”<sup>917</sup> We babble and make sounds because, as Beckett says, his work “is a matter of fundamental sounds made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else.”<sup>918</sup> In many respects Beckett’s work is traceable to the Romantics, where art itself and the subjective image it creates supersede any concerns for objectivity. Frank Kermode remarks, which are worth quoting again, that for the quintessential Romantic modernist, Baudelaire, the key feature of art amidst “the horror of the modern city” is its ability to “recall us to the truth of the image.” The image, Kermode says of Baudelaire, “is the reward of that agonizing difference; isolated in the city, the poet is the ‘seer.’ The Image, for all its concretion, precision, and oneness, is desperately difficult to communicate, and has for that reason alone as much to do with the alienation of the seer as the necessity of existing in the midst of a hostile society.”<sup>919</sup> In Beckett, modernism thrives on the image.

For all of Beckett’s aggressive experimentation and abstraction “he did not dispense with traditional realism *tout court*,” notes Tim Parks. “Throughout

his work we come across passages of haunting descriptive power in which we cannot help feeling the author has a considerable emotional investment.” Whether it’s Winnie’s radiant hope and determined opposition to decay and darkness, or Krapp’s entropy and remorse, we are never fully removed from empathy. “What is new in Beckett,” Parks adds, “is the way these powerful moments of realism are never allowed to extend right across a novel or play, creating, as in a traditional work, a fully imagined and consistent world that the reader is invited to consider reality.”<sup>920</sup> His reality is the world of the clown, who for Beckett is the purest metaphor for life’s grotesqueries. “Tragedy is the theatre of protest,” writes Jan Kott, “grotesque is the theatre of clowns.”<sup>921</sup> The trajectory of modern drama moves from Ibsen’s protest to Beckett’s grotesque, but they meet on the common ground of the human condition amidst the trauma of modernization.

# Part X

## Conclusion

In *The Subject of Modernity*, Anthony Cascardi writes that “modernity is built around a series of deeply contradictory aims.” We “accept the principles of science as reflecting the indisputable truths of reason,” yet “disputes about value and desires cannot be resolved according to the standards of rational truth.”<sup>922</sup> Modern dramatists created a boundary between ratiocination and emotion, logic and desire, where characters are incased in a vast no-man’s-land between failed aspirations and risible hopes. Milan Kundera remarked that “between the act and himself, a chasm opens. Man hopes to reveal his own image through his act, but that image bears no resemblance to him.” The dilemma begs the modernist question: “What possibilities remain for man in a world where the external determinants have become so overpowering that the internal impulses no longer carry weight?”<sup>923</sup> Modern dramatists come to a similar conclusion: there is nothing but ourselves and others adrift, comically and pathetically, amidst uncertainty. Still modern dramatists held to the goal of demonstrating truth, however distorted or opaque, and that this “truth” is a struggle worth undertaking. The next generation of playwrights I will examine, a more eclectic group incorporating a greater diversity of nations, generally give up the ghost of seeking or waiting for any truth. With uncertainty not as an antithesis to reason but a way of being, they work from the premise that being lost is a natural state of affairs. In *A History of Modern Drama*, Part II, I will examine dramatists from the 1960s to the present.



# Notes

- 1 A. Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (NY: Harper Collins, 1997).
- 2 Works that have influenced my thinking (in no particular order) are: J. Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice, Vol. I: Realism and Naturalism* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1981); *Vol. II Symbolism, Surrealism and the Absurd* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and *Vol. III Expressionism and Epic Theatre* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1981); J. Peter *Vladimir's Carrot: Modern Drama and the Modern Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); T. Driver, *Romantic Quest and Modern Query: History of Modern Theater* (NY: Delacorte, 1980); U. Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); R. Brustein, *Theatre in Revolt* (Chicago: Elephant Paperback, 1962); C. Innes, "Modernism in Drama," *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, M. Levenson, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 130–156; Joseph Wood Krutch, "Modernism" in *Modern Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1953); R. Gilman, *The Making of Modern Drama* (NY: DA Capo Press, 1972); E. Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker: A Study of Drama in Modern Times* (San Diego: Hartcourt, Brace, & Jovanovich, 1987); P. Szondi, *Theory of the Modern Drama*, M. Hays, tr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); and M. Valency, *The Flower and the Castle: An Introduction to Modern Drama* (NY: Macmillan, 1963).
- 3 P. de Man, "What is Modern?," *Critical Writings, 1953–1978* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 140.
- 4 W. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 43. Along these lines the German Enlightenment playwright and dramatist Gotthold Lessing wrote in *Laocoon* that "Painting and poetry should be like two just and friendly neighbors, neither of whom indeed is allowed to take unseemly liberties in the heart of the other's domain, but who exercise mutual forbearance on the borders, and effect a peaceful settlement for all the petty encroachments which

- circumstances may compel either to make in haste on the rights of the other," E. Frothingham, tr. (NY: Noonday Press, 1968), 110.
- 5 A. Strindberg, *To Damascus (Part I)*, *Strindberg Plays: Three*, M. Meyer, tr. (London: Methuen, 1991), 193.
  - 6 S. Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 15.
  - 7 M. Puchner, ed., "General Introduction," *Modern Drama: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, Vol. I (London: Routledge, 2008), 1.
  - 8 L. Rainey, "Introduction," *Modernism: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), xix.
  - 9 T. Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 7.
  - 10 Works on modernism are too numerous to cite here. Those that have influenced my thinking will be noted as they become appropriate.
  - 11 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., G. Anscombe, tr. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1953), 32.
  - 12 See, for instance, P. Childs, *Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2000), who says that *modern* "is a term that, from the latin *modo*" means "current" (12), and P. Faulkner, *Modernism* (London: Routledge, 1977): modernism "is part of the historical process by which the arts have dissociated themselves from nineteenth-century assumptions, which had come in the course of time to seem like dead conventions" (1).
  - 13 S. Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880–1918* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983), 34.
  - 14 C. Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, P. E. Charvet, tr. (NY: Penguin, 1972), 403.
  - 15 R. Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (NY: Penguin, 1973), 389–90.
  - 16 D. Schwarz, *Reconfiguring Modernism: Explorations in the Relationship between Modern Art and Modern Literature* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 9.
  - 17 F. Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essays on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), 120.
  - 18 Or, as George Wellwarth says, "modern drama is an extended meditation on existential rootlessness. It is a critical analysis of Man in the Void." *Modern Drama and the Death of God* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 3.
  - 19 P. Szondi, *Theory of the Modern Drama*, 7.
  - 20 F. Hegel, "Preface" *Phenomenology of Mind*, J. B. Baillie, tr. (1806; NY: Harper & Row, 1967), 75.
  - 21 P. Gay, *Pleasure Wars: The Bourgeois Experience, Victoria to Freud* (NY: W. W. Norton, 1998), 195.
  - 22 B. Cardullo, "The Theatrical Avant-Garde," *Theater of the Avant Garde, 1890–1950: A Critical Anthology*, Cardullo and R. Knopf, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 5.
  - 23 M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 45.
  - 24 A. Rimbaud, *Complete Works*, P. Schmidt, tr. (NY: Harper & Row, 1969), 102.
  - 25 In C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 378.

- 26 F. Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*, J. Harris & M. Hollis, tr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 19.
- 27 T. Judt, "The Glory of the Rails," *New York Review of Books* (Dec. 23, 2010): 60.
- 28 P. Greenhalgh, *The Modern Ideal: The Rise and Collapse of Idealism in the Visual Arts* (London: V & A Pub., 2005), 22.
- 29 I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, P. Guyer and E. Matthews, tr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 89.
- 30 According to Harvie Ferguson, modernity "continually creates itself from itself; it does not rest on some mysterious natural substratum or emanate from some equally mysterious divine principle," but rather "comes to itself in perpetual inner motion, as a continuous process of restless self-production." *Modernity & Subjectivity: Body, Soul, Spirit* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 3.
- 31 M. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 48.
- 32 A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Presentation*, Vol. I, R. Aquila, tr. (NY: Pearson, 2008), 294.
- 33 E. Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 209.
- 34 F. Hebbel, *Maria Magdalena*, C. Mueller, tr., in *The Modern Theatre*, R. Corrigan, ed. (NY: Macmillan, 1964), 48.
- 35 J. Krutch, "Modernism" in *Modern Drama*, 7.
- 36 In addition to its political connotations, "freedom" became an aesthetic demarcation for modernists owing largely to Immanuel Kant's assertion that there is an "incalculable gulf between the domain of the concept of nature, as the sensible, and the domain of the concept of freedom, as the supersensible, so that from the former to the latter (thus by means of the theoretical use of reason) no transition is possible." However, for Kant "freedom" of imagination, intuition, and thought, guided by the senses (what he means by "sensible" and "supersensible"), "should have an influence" on nature, and "the concept of freedom should make the end that is imposed by its laws real in the sensible world, and nature must consequently also be able to be conceived in such a way that the lawfulness of its form is at least in agreement with the possibility of the ends that are to be realized in it in accordance with the laws of freedom." *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 63.
- 37 R. Pippin, *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 95.
- 38 M. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (NY: Penguin, 1982), 15.
- 39 J. McGowan, *Postmodernism and Its Critics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 7.
- 40 A. Berman, *Preface to Modernism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 157–8.
- 41 M. Goldman, "The Ghost of Joy: Reflections on Romanticism and the Forms of Modern Drama," *Romantic and Modern: Revaluations of Literary Tradition*, G. Bornstein, ed. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), 54.

- 42 K. Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," *Early Writings*, R. Livingston and R. Benton, tr. (NY: Penguin, 1975), 377.
- 43 H. Ibsen, *The Complete Major Prose Plays*, R. Fjelde, tr. (NY: Plume, 1979), 193.
- 44 C. Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," *Selected Writings*, 399–400.
- 45 H. Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity*, J. Moore, tr. (London: Verso, 1995), 179.
- 46 Voltaire, "Introduction, The Age of Louis XIV," *The Varieties of History*, F. Stern, ed. (NY: Meridian Books, 1957), 40.
- 47 F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, J. Sibree, tr. (NY: Dover, 1956), 422.
- 48 I. Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 62–3.
- 49 K. Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 67.
- 50 T. Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 5.
- 51 F. von Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, A. Bowie, tr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 128; F. Schiller, *Aesthetic and Philosophical Essays* (Boston: Indy, 2006), 40, no tr.
- 52 R. Brustein, *Theatre in Revolt*, 8.
- 53 J. Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 538.
- 54 F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, R. Geuss and R. Speirs, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 62.
- 55 F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 40.
- 56 C. Baudelaire, "The Salon of 1846," *Selected Writings*, 52.
- 57 F. Schiller, *Aesthetic and Philosophical Essays*, 78, no tr.
- 58 F. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003), 29.
- 59 F. Kermode, *The Romantic Image* (NY: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1957), 5.
- 60 H. Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity*, J. Moore, tr. (London: Verso, 1995), 179.
- 61 P. Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, and the Mode of Excess* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1985), 15.
- 62 J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, F. Lawrence, tr. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992), 53.
- 63 T. Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, 94.
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